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REVOLVER ROB, THE RED-HANDED; or, The Belle of Nugget Camp.

BY JOSEPH E. BADGER, JR.,

AUTHOR OF "EQUINOX TOM," "SOL SCOTT," "ALABAMA JOE," "JACK RABBIT," "CAPTAIN COOL-BLADE," "PACIFIC PETE," ETC., ETC.



A GASPING, GURGLING CRY WELLED FROM THE GIANT'S LIPS, THEN REVOLVER ROBINSON, SEEMINGLY WITHOUT AN EFFORT, RAISED THE HUGE BODY TO A HORIZONTAL POSITION.

Revolver Rob, THE RED-HANDED;

OR,

The Belle of Nugget Camp.

BY JOSEPH E. BADGER, JR.,

AUTHOR OF "OLD '49," "SWEET WILLIAM,"
"JOAQUIN THE TERRIBLE," "THE LONG
HAIRED 'PARDS," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE LEAGUE OF SIX.

"It's an ugly job—monstrous ugly—an' the nigher a feller gits to it, the uglier it looks!"

Barely audible to his own ears, these words dropped from the heavily-bearded lips of a man who crouched there amid the thick-lying bowlders and scrubby bushes, his head crested like that of some frightened snake, his gleaming eyes fixed upon a skeleton form which was but dimly outlined by the first rays of the rising moon.

It was a wild and dreary-looking spot, seemingly in the heart of the Arizona Foot hills. On three sides the ground rose in rocky waves, grim and frowning, the ragged rocks and misshapen vegetation forming many a weird, fantastic tableau, the effect of which was deepened by the ghostly light of the moon as it sifted through the tree-tops beyond.

Near the head of the V shaped valley thus formed, stood the skeleton form—the ruins of a derrick and windlass, beneath which yawned the mouth of a shaft; a dark and gloomy pit, which told of vain hopes and blasted prospects in the days gone by.

"Thar's the shaft, an' thar's the rope around the drum, jest as the paper said," muttered the man, as he stared at the ruins, conflicting doubt and suspicion in every line of his hard features. "Be here to-night as the moon comes up; so it run. Not a word n'r a hint to nobody, ef you want to git even with the man who killed your brother, without no risk to yourself."

"Jes' so the paper talked. But who writ it? Who putt it onto my shirt when I was sound asleep? Was that last line a lie, or did it mean jest what it said: 'A fri'nd to you, an' a inemy to Revolver Robinson.' Wasn't it all a cunnin' trick o' Revolver Rob, to git me out here an' put a ind to the death-hunt which I swore against him when I larned how he killed pore little Dandy? An' yit—why should he take so much trouble, when he could 'a' ended it all then—when he mought 'a' stuck a knife through my heart, jest as easy as he stuck that pin through the paper an' my shirt?"

For a few moments longer the man lay still, then, as though he had conquered his doubts, he arose, only to drop down once more as he caught the sound of hasty footsteps from the valley below. Swift as thought a revolver slipped from his belt, one finger pressing the trigger back as his thumb raised the hammer to deaden the sharp click which otherwise might have betrayed his presence to the newcomer.

A slender, frail-looking figure in rough mining clothes came rapidly up the valley, and only paused when within arm's-length of the windlass. He cast a swift glance around him, and as he faced the rising moon, the hidden man saw that his entire face was covered with a colored silk handkerchief, through which two small holes had been cut to leave him the use of his eyes.

Only that one glance, then the stranger caught hold of the rope which passed twice around the drum of the windlass, his feet resting in the loop with which the only visible end was furnished. The other hung down the shaft, and grasping it with his hands the adventurer was enabled to regulate his descent with ease.

The watcher stole silently forward as the other vanished from his view, and lying low along the dank clay with which the mouth of the shaft was surrounded, listened intently.

He was not kept long in suspense. The bolder adventurer had descended only a few yards when his further progress was checked, as though the loose end of the rope had suddenly become entangled, or else grasped by a strong hand. And then from the intense gloom below there came a voice, deep and menacing:

"Hold! Make a motion, even to the stirring of a finger, before I give you permission, and you're a dead man!"

Of the twain whose ears caught this stern intimation, the spy above seemed the one most deeply moved. He lay closer to the ground and grasped his weapon so tightly that his sinewy, sun-embrowned hand showed white in the moonlight.

The other gave no start, made no sound of surprise or alarm. In a shrill, peculiar tone, he said:

"You hold the age, boss! I ain't got no say-so ontel you pass or sling your claps. I ain't in no great rush, anyhow."

"Who are you? How came you here?"

"A kind o' excuse fer a man, an' I come on my two legs."

"This is no farce," sternly uttered the unseen, cutting the reckless little fellow short. "If you have any right here at this time you know what answer to give. If you give the wrong one, say your prayers in a hurry, for you'll never see the light of day again."

"Revolver Rob—"

"Enough!" cried the man below. "You are one of the selected! Descend in peace. The rest must be along soon."

"Sort o' fam'ly party, I reckon?" the little man said as he resumed his descent, in a few moments reaching the bottom.

"Patience for a few minutes," said the other, shortly. "Your curiosity shall be fully satisfied ere long, never fear."

As he spoke, the man was pulling upon the rope, sending the loop back up the shaft for the next comer.

From his position the spy had overheard every word of this brief conversation, and his doubts were entirely set at rest. No sooner was the rope still than he grasped it and swung himself over the dark opening.

Like his predecessor, he was halted when half-way down, and in response to the challenge at once uttered the name of Revolver Robinson.

Thrice more was this repeated, with unimportant variations, then the leading spirit secured the slack of the rope, without drawing the loop up to the surface, as though the circle was now complete. During it all not a word had been interchanged by those on the level. Grim and silent they stood, each in ignorance of what was about to transpire, only knowing that they were here to gain sweet revenge on the one of all mankind whom they hated the most bitterly.

"Gentlemen," said the chief, after a brief pause, "our number is complete now, and unless there has been treachery at work, all is in readiness to proceed at once to business. You have each one of you given the correct password, and it seems hardly possible that there can have been any mistake made. Still, the man we are about to league ourselves against is no common adversary. Cunning plots have been laid against his life more times than I care to enumerate, only to fail disastrously. This time there must be no false move. We are pitting our lives against his, and if we are to come off victorious, we must neglect no precautions at the outset."

"I alone know each and every member of this league, and there is no necessity for that knowledge becoming universal at present. If such a necessity should ever arise, I will make you known to each other."

"To make sure that all is on the square, I am about to strike a light. You can hide your faces from each other if you think best. I can recognize my men by other means."

After a brief pause, during which the sense of hearing told them one and all that this suggestion was being acted upon, the chief opened the slide of a dark lantern, throwing the clear light full upon each one of the five men in turn, eying them keenly. Each face was hidden from view, for the most part by handkerchiefs, but he appeared satisfied with the view he obtained.

No less keenly and far more curiously did the five men thus strangely convened together eye the man who had summoned them to this lonely rendezvous, but with scant satisfaction. Not a ray of light was suffered to fall upon his person, and they could only see that he was tall, strongly-built, wearing a long cloak and a slouched hat of soft felt.

Seemingly satisfied with his scrutiny, the chief closed his lantern, casting all into darkness the most intense.

"You are the men whom I summoned to this meeting, and now we can proceed to business without any further delay. As the first step, and to avoid all need of speaking names, you will please range yourselves in line, against the wall, opposite where I now stand."

This was quickly done, for one and all of the men were eager to learn the views of this mysterious friend, who had promised them vengeance upon the being whom they dreaded almost as entirely as they hated him.

"Good enough. Let the man who stands on the right end speak first. Why are you here to-night?"

"Because you left or sent word fer me to come," was the short response, in the voice of the man who had played the spy while the braver or more reckless miner descended.

"Because I promised to help you to the revenge which your heart thirsteth for—exactly. Who killed your brother?"

"The imp o' Satan which men call Revolver Rob!" was the fierce, grating response.

"How long ago did that happen?"

"Goin' on three years—"

"Yet Revolver Robinson is still living! Why have you not avenged your brother before this? Explain. We want no cowards in our league."

A short, hard laugh greeted this stern speech.

"Mebbe I be a coward, as you insinuate, but boss or no boss, you don't want to speak them

words when I kin see who an' whar to strike. Fer this once, let it pass."

"Why hain't I tuck revenge fer Dandy? Because I've jest found out the man as killed him. Fer this three year, I've bin huntin' the wide world over fer a man named Black Jack Copeland, fer that was the handle he went by when my brother was rubbed out. Nobody couldn't tell me nothin' more 'bout it then that. He wasn't in town but a week or so, an' he went by that name. He killed Dandy, an' then disappeared as ef the airth hed opened an' swallowed him up. How was I to know that he was in disguise—that his ha'r an' face all was colored so dark, an' that by right she was sandy ha'ed an' light complected?"

"Twas less than a week ago that I struck the right trail, an' no longer then yest'day that I fust set eyes onto my game. He was with his crowd, then, an' though I mought 'a' killed him, they would 'a' chawed me up at a mouthful the next minnit. He didn't know me, so I could a'ford to wait a better chainece."

"I retract my words. Forget that they were ever spoken. You shall have your revenge, and that right speedily, but the crimes of Revolver Robinson have been too many and too black for him to die a speedy and painless death. He must suffer as he has made so many others suffer, before the noose of the hangman claims its reward."

"I'd rather let out his life with my own hand!"

"We will settle all that in good time. If, when you are in possession of my plans in all their details, the prospect does not satisfy you, then some of the rest of the league can take their turn. For the present you have said enough. For our purposes there is no need of speaking names. You will be known as Number One. Be silent while we hear what Number Two has to say—the man who stands next to you."

"Twon't take ye long," c me the shrill, peculiar tones of the little man. "War an' war to the knife—the knife to the hilt—ag'inst Revolver Rob!"

"You have good cause to hate him, our mutual enemy, that I well know, else you would not be among us this night," said the chief, quickly, as the little man paused. "But that the others may see that your stake is at least as great as theirs, tell us briefly what charge you can bring against that demon."

"Mebbe it's a mighty little thing to kick up a row about, or to hold a bitter grudge ag'inst a man fer. Some o' you'll think I'm lackin' in the upper-story, but all the same, it's the natur' o' the beast."

"If any comments are needed, we can make them," shortly interposed the chief. "Tell your story—make your charges in as few words as possible."

"Four years ago, I knowed a man who hed a cosy home, a lovin' wife, a good business an' a snug pile o' money laid up in bank ag'inst a rainy day. Besides this he hed what he could 'a' swore was a true and tried fri'nd, one more like a brother then the comparative stranger which he raaly was."

"It'd take too much time to tell all how it come about, but the eend o' the story kin be told in one mouthful. The fool-critter went off on a business trip, leavin' his wife an' his fri'nd to take keer o' his a'fairs to home. An' they done it so well that when he come home, thar warn't a ha'r n'r hide o' the hull thing left—all gone: goods, money, fri'nd, an' with that fri'nd his wife went too!"

"Good riddance, I reckon some o' you're thinkin', but as I told ye at the start, this man wasn't much more'n hafe baked, an' he made a heap more fuss over the loss o' the woman-critter then all the rest putt together. It knocked him flat o' his back, an' when he come back to his senses ag'in, the trail was so cold that do his best he couldn't pick it up."

"Bit by bit he had his eyes opened, an' the kind neighbors told him what they said a blind man could 'a' see'd all along: that the man he treated as a fri'nd all along hed bin the blackest sort o' inemy. You kin guess what it was they tuck sech pleasure in tellin' him. It turned him from a soft-hearted fool to a devil with but one aim in life—to find an' kill the two bein's as hed bin all-in-all to him afore that black an' bitter day."

"Fer three good years he hunted, an' then stumbled onto the trail jest by a chainece. He found the woman, but she was dyin' o' starvation an' the hard usage a woman o' the town must expect when she gits nigh the foot o' the down-grade."

"He hed swore to kill her on sight, but thar was a soft spot left in his heart, after all, an' the sight o' that dyin' wretch tetch'd it, I reckon; anyway, he listened to the story she hed to tell him."

"You kin easy guess what that story was. Men don't run away with other fellers' wives to stick to 'em fer life. Damaged goods like that ain't valied very high, when the fust bloom is brushed off, an' so she was left in a strange city to shift fer herself, sick, without money or fri'nds. It was either starve or take another step along the down-grade, an' it come easiest to go down hill."

"A very affecting story—too affecting to be told at full length," said the chief, with something close akin to a sneer in his tones. "Time is valuable. When business is not quite so pressing, we will gladly listen, but now—this deceived husband was yourself?"

"An' the false fri'nd was the man people now call Revolver Robinson."

"Exactly. You sought but could not find him, until now, else we would be rejoicing over his corpse, instead of plotting against his life. Number Three, we will hear what charges you have to bring against Revolver Robinson."

The third man spoke up promptly, in a strong German accent, but it is not necessary for us to enter more fully into details. From first to last it was one black record of crime, treachery and unbridled passions. If one-half that was alleged against him was true, then Revolver Robinson, the Red-Handed, richly deserved the sanguinary title which fame had given him.

When Number Five ceased speaking, there was a brief silence, broken at last by the chief.

"Gentlemen, you have all spoken, and to the point. Each one has made a charge against Revolver Rob, dark and serious enough to doom him to death, even if only that single crime could be proved. But deep and deadly as are the wrongs you have suffered, if necessary I could bring a hundred others who have quite as bitter cause to hate this demon. I could raise a regiment of men who long for the death of Revolver Robinson, who would gladly join with us in our projected crusade against him and his—for that he has many strong and daring friends, you know as well as I.

"I also have cause to hate this man. I could have slain him, time and again, but I am aiming at more than his life. Simple death would be no great punishment for such a fiend incarnate. To do him justice, he values his own life as lightly as he holds that of his enemies. Whatever else may be said against him, no man can accuse him of having one drop of cowardly blood in his veins. So far as brute courage goes, a braver man never drew the breath of life.

"Granting this, as we must, we must also admit that in plotting against him, we are taking our lives in our hands, for if the faintest suspicion of our purpose ever reaches the ears of Revolver Rob, he will strike swift and sure, unless we forestall him. This we can and will do, if you trust all to me. And I solemnly swear to give you the sweetest revenge mortal heart could wish.

"I have not entered into this matter with my eyes shut. Every step has been carefully weighed, and I can see the end clearly before me. You may or may not know each other, but I have read your most secret thoughts, and chose you from among a hundred others, any and all of whom would have gladly accepted the chance which I now offer you.

"We are bound together by our mutual hatred for this red-handed desperado. One and all we have sworn to never know rest until his crimes have been expiated by his death.

"It would not be such a difficult task, were his death alone to be considered, but he has gathered about him a gang of desperadoes only less dangerous than himself, each of whom has sworn to avenge the fall of any member of the league. To kill him, we must kill a score of others, unless we do our work in secret. Even then the chances are that the slayer will fall a victim to the gang of Revolver Rob. But even so, shall we hold back and suffer him to go on in his bloody career, to make others suffer as we have suffered? I, for one, say no!"

"The six o' us kin bounce him at the same time, an' git away with both him an' sech o' the gang as may be along with the p'izen cuss at the time," said number one.

"Time enough for that when the plans I have formed shall have failed," quickly added the chief. "Listen, gentlemen:

"Our chief aim is the death of Revolver Robinson. But I believe that we can accomplish that at the same time we are filling our own pockets with gold. Revenge is sweet, but it is none the less so when coupled with a snug little fortune.

"Revolver Rob is the head of a regularly organized band of highwaymen and road-agents. Their purpose is to rob and kill. They have struck more than one blow, already, and are now completing arrangements for a stroke that will electrify the whole country. Never mind how I came to learn this: enough that it is the truth. If you will second me, we will reap the reward instead of them—"

The chief abruptly ceased speaking, and there was a hasty movement—then the bright glare of a pistol-shot.

CHAPTER II.

THE AIR OF THE LEAGUE.

A WILD, agonized cry was blended with the muffled report of the pistol, and by that brief glare, the five members of the strangely-formed league caught a glimpse of two figures in what seemed a death-grapple, their arms intertwined, their bodies swaying to and fro, then falling to the ground with a dull thump.

For a moment they were paralyzed. Brief as had been the red light of the exploding weapon, they had seen that their number was complete without the addition of the one who was grappling with their chief, and like a revelation the startling truth flashed upon them.

"It's that cussed Revolver Rob, or some o' his gang!" cried Number One, with a snarling curse of rage.

"Close in an' knife the whelp!" cried another.

"Hold!" came a clear, commanding voice from the darkness—the voice of their chief.

"Hold! Not a move, not a step, until I say the word! The man who burns powder or tries to flee, shall die the death of a dog by my hand!"

"Whooray! the boss is right eend up—"

"Silence!" sternly cried the chief. "Where one snake has crept, others may be lurking. One of you stand by the rope and kill the first man who tries to escape by that means. Ready, now—but beware lest you strike a friend instead of an enemy."

Even as he spoke, the chief drew the slide of his dark-lantern, sweeping the clear light around the scene with a steady motion. With eyes aglow and weapons drawn, the five members of the league glared around them, ready to seal their dangerous secret with the life-blood of any spying foe; but the fan-shaped light revealed only their own figures and that of a prostrate shape which lay at the feet of the chief.

"Stand by the rope, Number One," said the chief, shortly, as he stooped over the motionless form for an instant, then arising with a hard laugh. "There's nothing further to fear from this rascal. We'll leave him for a moment, while we see whether or no he has any comrades in his spying. Ready, men! If there are others here, we must take them, dead or alive!"

The level on which the conspirators stood was not an extensive one, being nothing more than a rude sort of chamber, some twenty feet square, while from one side, extended a tunnel, not more than six or seven feet in height and breadth. Both chamber and tunnel were shored and braced with rough timbers, to guard against the sides and roof caving in upon the workers, and these were still in a state of good preservation, though years had come and gone since the old mine was worked, or, in all probability, even occupied until on this peculiar occasion. Yet, limited though it was in extent, the old mine afforded many a spot where a spy might lie hidden from all save a close examination, thanks to the gnarled and knotted timber.

Foot by foot the chamber and the tunnel were examined by the conspirators, but without the discovery of any more eavesdroppers, and once more the six men stood together in the opening below the old shaft.

"One word before we proceed any further, gentlemen," the chief uttered, his voice sounding cold and stern. "Can you swear, upon honor, that none of you let drop, either on purpose or unwittingly, our intention of meeting here to-night?"

As one man they responded. Neither word nor action of theirs could have betrayed the rendezvous.

The chief seemed to read the truth in their tones, for his voice was softer as he spoke again.

"And I am equally sure that I am innocent. But all the same, we have been spied upon and our plans overheard by one of the most dangerous tools of Revolver Robinson. Behold!"

Stooping he raised the head of the prostrate figure, turning the flood of light upon the pain and rage-distorted features. Eagerly the men pressed forward, and from the lips of several came cries of anger and amazement.

With a grim laugh the chief spoke:

"You were ever a bold player, Ned Wicklow," he said, tapping the face of the dead man with one finger, hatred and contempt mingling in his voice. "But I have called the turn on you this time!"

"He's one o' Revolver Rob's gang, then?" asked Number One, adding apologetically: "Ye know I told ye I hedn't bin in these diggin's but a day or two, an' so hain't—"

"That's plain enough, else you'd never ask such a question," said the chief, with a short laugh. "Ever since he has been in these parts, Ned Wicklow has been the shadow of Revolver Rob, his right-hand man in all things. He and Lucky Jackson are the only two men whom the head devil really trusts. That fact alone is proof enough that Wicklow was here for no friendly purpose."

"Wa'al the pesky imp is dead enough now, an' what he found out on this spyin' trip won't do nuther him nor his boss overmuch good. Lucky you found the cuss out in time!"

"It was a piece of luck," said the chief, clearing his throat, as he lowered the head of the dead man and rose erect once more. "Twice while I was speaking to you, I fancied I could feel the presence of some one close behind me, and believed that it was one of you five, sneaking around to try and mark me so that you would know me when we met outside. I knew that none would act thus, unless a traitor at heart, if not in reality, and resolved to read

him a lesson which would not be easily forgotten.

"For that reason I flashed the light upon you, but I soon realized my mistake, for even as I scrutinized you five, I heard the faint sound of breathing over my shoulder."

"Ef you'd only jist spoke the word—"

"No doubt you would soon have settled accounts with the spy," laughed the chief, "but at the same time some of us might have lost the number of our mess, and I preferred not to run that risk. That I was right, you can see for yourselves. Ned Wicklow has gone over the range, and our secrets are safe. At least Revolver Rob will never learn them from this spy."

"Und I hopes he vill soon pe vere der duyfel 'll keep him so puisy as he von't haf no dimes vor dinkin' 'pout anydin' at how veervul hot der vedder is bin crowin', right off. Dot dirgy guss'd make a pooty gorbis, I dinks—so!"

"You shall put it to vote, men, after I have told you all my views concerning the matter," said the chief, quietly. "I still think that we can put this desperado to better use than to kill him off-hand, but I may be wrong. You shall judge.

"As I said before, not one among you all have one-half the cause to hate Revolver Robinson that I have. A score of deaths could not begin to satisfy the debt of vengeance which I owe him. His life shall pay the forfeit at an early day, but in the meantime I propose to make him pay big money for the trouble and expense he is putting us to. You are none of you so rich but what you can stand to be richer."

"Gelt is goot!" grunted the German, and that he expressed the views of his mates, was clear enough from the murmur of approval which came from out the darkness.

"Long's it don't resk losin' our grip onto Revolver Rob, that is," supplemented Number One.

"That of course," retorted the chief, a little impatiently. "When you come to know me better, you will see that I am the last man on earth to forget the debt that Revolver Robinson owes me. Now listen:

"Common sense must tell you that I am playing this game for a big stake, else I would not be taking so much trouble with it. It does not concern you, though, what my object is, outside the death of our mutual enemy. Enough that I am willing to not only share such danger as our plotting against him and his crowd incurs, but am ready to pay you comfortable wages from this night until we can say our prayers over the grave of the dead desperado."

"Three cheers for the boss, boys!" cried one of the conspirators, carried away by his unlooked-for generosity; but the chief quickly checked this demonstration.

"Hold! Not a sound above your breath. There may be more spies than this dead dog trying to get at the bottom of our secrets. Don't forget again that we are playing 'be game of death, and a single false move may run out the score against us. We're bucking against a hard crowd in Revolver Robinson and his gang."

There was a brief silence after this sharp reproof. None of the five cared to speak, and the chief seemed lost in deep thought for the time being. But ere long he shook himself together, and resumed:

"I was telling you of the double lives led by Revolver Rob and his crowd, when I had to rub out that troublesome fellow, Ned Wicklow.

What I said then, I now repeat. They are playing a heavier game than any to be seen over the card-tables. That does well enough as a blind, and they make enough to explain their sticking to it; but where they take in one dollar by gambling, the gang makes a hundred by still more bare-faced robbery. In plainer words, Revolver Robinson and his gang are road-agents of the most desperate stripe."

"More than once I've thought that they could tell something about Gold Mask and his outfit that would astonish the natives, did they take the notion to speak," said Number Five.

"And right there your head was level," promptly confirmed the chief. "Revolver Rob and Gold Mask are one and the same person."

A simultaneous cry of wonder broke from the five. The chief laughed softly, like one who fully enjoyed the sensation produced by his words.

For the past year, all Arizona had been startled by the daring exploits and numerous robberies committed by a band of rough-riders under command of one who wore a full mask of polished and richly chased gold, from which he had taken his *nom de guerre*. At times he seemed the polished courtier, robbing his victims with wondrous grace and politeness, entertaining them with choice witticisms, treating those of the fairer sex with a gallantry which would have done honor to the dashing Claude Duval of bygone days; but he was not always in this humor. Time and again had his hand been stained with human blood, and on several occasions he had shamefully mistreated those women who fell into his power. A dozen different rewards were offered for his capture.

dead or alive, but as yet with no apparent effect, save to render the noted outlaw more desperate and daring. Twice, on the offer to bestow full pardon on any one who should deliver him up to an outraged justice, members of the band had entered into negotiations for his betrayal, but each time the plot was frustrated, and the traitor found dead, placarded in the name of Gold Mask, who threatened all others with the same fate who tried to sell him to the law.

Nearly every desperado of note throughout the territory had, at some time or another, had his name coupled with that of the mysterious Gold Mask, but it was all vague surmise. Although Number Five spoke quite confidently, he was fully as much surprised as any one of his fellow conspirators when the chief declared that Revolver Robinson was none other than the notorious outlaw.

"I have only my bare word to offer in proof of this," added the chief, coolly, "but ere the passage of many days you will see that my charge is well founded. Revolver Rob is none other than Gold Mask, and as such I have sworn to bring him to justice.

"Just how I obtained my information, it is not necessary you should know, at present; enough that the gang are playing their cards adroitly for the biggest stake that they have ever landed. Unless my scheme fails, they shall do all the work, while we will reap the benefit and bag the dust, without running any risk worth mentioning. When the time comes for work, you shall know more; for the present this is sufficient.

"A few more words, and I am through. I said that you should have wages sufficient to pay you for your trouble, no matter whether we win the big stake or not. While this league exists, you will receive five dollars per day, payable weekly in advance. Is this satisfactory?"

"Boss, it's jest old pie!" exclaimed Number One, adding with a ferocity which was not all assumed: "Ef thar's ary galoot here as don't say the same, durned ef I don't jest crawl all over his back an' everlastin'ly chaw his alabaster ear—amen!"

But there was not a disapproving murmur, and the doughty champion subsided as the chief opened the slides of his dark lantern and counted out the sum named into each ready hand.

"On the first of each week you shall receive the same amount, though I may not always choose the same messenger to convey it to you—"

"Then we don't light down onto Revolver Rob right off?" asked Number Five, in a tone of disappointment.

"That will depend on his own movements," was the quiet response. "We would be foolish to kill our goose before it has laid the golden egg. Your revenge will be none the less sweet for waiting and anticipating the feast.

"I am not yet positive that Revolver Robinson means to take a prominent part in the big game. If it is arranged so that it will be carried out no matter what befalls him, before the scheme is fairly ripe, then I will strike him at once.

"If I should get the worst of the encounter, then you can take your turns. Even if I am rubbed out, you will receive full instructions how to act, never fear.

"You will hold yourselves in readiness to act on short notice, with the utmost promptness, but at the same time you will take care to avoid giving grounds for the slightest suspicion—will take especial care not to come into collision with the gang of Revolver Robinson, unless a fight be actually thrust upon you; then strike home."

"You know all o' us, but we don't know you from a hole in the ground," said Number Two, a little doubtingly. "How kin we be sure that the word comes from you, 'stead o' some o' them pizen critters tryin' fer to play roots onto us?"

"The proof will not be lacking when the summons for work comes, never fear," was the prompt response. "First: I solemnly swear to put you in the way of wreaking full vengeance on Revolver Robinson and such of his gang as may have injured or wronged any member of this league.

"In return, you must swear to obey me in all things until that end is reached and this league is dissolved by mutual consent. Do you all agree to this?"

"This chicken do, even though the trail you may p'int out leads straight through blazes!" cried Number One, with an emphasis that could not be mistaken.

"And I!"

"Me too!"

"Pet your pottom poots!"

"Heart and hand, body and soul I am ready to take the oath!" came the deep voice of Number Four, being the first words he had spoken since giving in his charges against Revolver Robinson. "Through fire and water, through bloodshed and death, through all that the fiend can lay in the path of those who seek vengeance upon his favorite son—only show us how that revenge can be surely obtained, and

we will obey you as unquestioningly as though we were but the fingers on your hand!"

"And if there should be one among our number who, through personal fear, or the hope of gain, betrays us by selling our secrets to the enemy?"

"I'll eat him without salt or pepper!" cried Number One.

A savage, united growl came from the lips of the others, which was far more eloquent than the hottest words.

"Good," cried the chief, grim satisfaction in his tone. "So long as we keep on that platform we are all right. When I have any orders to give you, they will come over the signature of *Nemesis*. You swear to obey them, and that without question or hesitation, even though they may carry you a foot or two over the line of the law?"

Quite as promptly came the answer. These men were not to be daunted by such trifles. Anything to compass the death of Revolver Robinson—that was their motto.

"Once more good!" cried the chief. "You will await my orders, and not take any decisive step without them. I hardly need repeat the necessity of caution in your movements while waiting. Let Revolver Rob get but the faintest inkling of this league and its aims, and your lives will not be worth a dollar, all told!"

"There is no need of my saying anything more at present. We fully understand each other. Yet, if you take my advice, you will not attempt to discover who your allies are. Time enough for that when we get fairly to work, and if you are in ignorance, you will run no danger of betraying all by talking the matter over with each other.

"I will go up the shaft first, and you can follow at intervals as I shake the rope. Steady, now!"

Putting his feet into the loop, the chief allowed himself to be pulled up to the surface, and as soon as he was fairly outside, he gave the signal for the first of the five to ascend.

He was promptly obeyed, and as the muffled head of the fellow came above the crumbling mouth of the shaft, the chief grasped him by the shoulder and helped him out.

"You will make all haste back to town," he said, in a low and guarded tone. "Do not loiter by the way, and be sure to drop in at the Oasis to-night. There may be work to do."

"That hits me whar I live, boss, an' you kin bet high that this chicken'll be thar on time, ready fer anythin' from a horn o' whisky to a bangin' bee."

The voice was that of the conspirator named Number One, and where the hand of the chief had touched him, the moon now shone upon a small cross in red. So with each one of the five.

CHAPTER III.

A CUNNING GAMBLER.

NOT quite two miles from the lively little town known throughout the south-eastern portion of Arizona as Nugget Camp, stood the Flamsteed ranch. There was quite a history connected with the place, and for certain reasons which will explain themselves ere many pages have been left behind, that history must be glanced at now.

Several years before the date of our story—just how many was not generally known, but at any rate before the Nugget Camp sprang into existence—Colonel Forrest Flamsteed came into these wilds and built him this ranch; a substantial one-story structure of stone, which gave outward promise of far more strength than comfort. Little marvel that such was the case, erected as it was in the very heart of the Indian country, where the wild Apaches were wont to roam at will, lords of all that they surveyed. The wonder was that any man should have even dreamed of building a dwelling in such a spot—greater marvel that the structure still stood, and that the one who raised it was yet in the land of the living, with his flowing gray locks unclipped by scalping-knife.

There were not lacking those, in the days of which this story treats, who told in guarded whispers, eked out by still more significant nods and winks, wild and blood-curdling tales of a white chief of the Hill Apaches, but never was the charge openly made against the doughty colonel, whose reputation as a fire-eater was wide-spread.

Nearly two years before that curious meeting took place in the old shaft, word of a marvelous "strike" in the mountains spread like wildfire, and from that rumor uprose Nugget Camp. Colonel Forrest Flamsteed was at the bottom of the movement, and though the strike did not "pan out" quite as well as was at first expected, gold was found in paying quantities, and those lucky persons who were first on the grounds had or were making their fortunes.

As a matter of course, Colonel Forrest Flamsteed had not neglected his own interests, and at the date of this story he was deemed the mining king of that portion of Arizona, owning several well-developed mines, besides holding many other promising claims. That he was very rich, no one doubted, but all knew that his wealth would have been doubled only for two unfortunate failings: the love of

strong drink and an overpowering passion for playing cards.

"He's grit clean through, but he don't know any more about the science of gambling than a tomcat does of operatic music," tersely uttered Long John Wilkinson, shortly after a profitable all-night seance with the colonel.

Besides the colonel himself, there was only one other inmate of the Flamsteed ranch. That was his daughter, Pet.

If she had a more formal name the public in general were blissfully ignorant of the fact. It suited her marvelously well, too, this dainty little home-like fairy, for few could think of her, at the first or second meeting, as a full grown woman.

And yet she had been with the colonel from the first, even before the ranch was completed, when any moment might bring the ruthless Apaches down upon them with brand and scalping-knife, days when her hands were far more familiar with the rifle and revolver than book or needle.

Of those days she could not be brought to speak at any length, showing such distaste for the subject that those who fain would have questioned her were forced to desist.

A dark brunette in type, Pet Flamsteed was below the medium height of her sex, light and agile as a fairy, yet with limbs and form well rounded and plump. She was rarely lovely, her features well-nigh perfect in themselves, her eyes dark as midnight and gloriously brilliant, her lips red and moist, her teeth white and pure as pearls.

Despite the lonely life she led—for she rarely went as far from home as to the town below—Pet Flamsteed did not lack for suitors. Indeed, at one time not a male soul in all Nugget Camp but what was over head and ears in love with the dainty little fairy. The trail which led from town to the Flamsteed ranch was then the most traveled road in that section, and scarcely a day passed but what some one or more of the sturdy miners, dressed up in their best, clean shaven and washed, popped the question to her with their hearts in their mouths—only to slowly retrace their steps with that same organ trying to thump a passageway down through the soles of their boots.

One and all of these suitors, rich and poor, workers with hands, workers with brains, and that peculiar combination of both, the professional gambler, were treated precisely alike by the Belle of Nugget Camp, as Pet Flamsteed was popularly known, until it became evident to the most obtuse that "the little gal hadn't lost no husband in them diggin's, at least," whereupon they very wisely turned their eyes toward another prize which gave promise of being more attainable, and to whom the before-mentioned title of honor was almost unanimously transferred.

This was Miss Della Delsarte, as her name appeared upon the hotel register, but who, within a week of her first appearance in Nugget Camp, was enthusiastically re-christened Dashing Dell, and voted Queen of the Camp, though not without some gentle discussion, during which powder was burned and bright steel crimsoned, thanks to the few who still upheld the claims of the declining star.

Pet Flamsteed did not grieve seriously over her dethronement, though on the evening in question, as she sat underneath the little vine-clad porch, her face was sad, and there was a mournful, far-away look in her dark eyes that told of anything rather than a happy heart.

She was lost in a reverie so deep that the man who came up the trail from Nugget Camp leaned against a tree-trunk and eyed her leisurely for several minutes before advancing further. Nor was it until he came forward and stood almost within arm's length that Pet arose with a start and little exclamation of alarm.

"I humbly beg pardon if I startled you, lady," said the man, speaking in a low, husky voice, as he doffed his battered white hat letting his long gray hair float in the brisk air of the mountains. "You sat so still, and my eyesight is so feeble, that I did not see you until just now."

He spoke so humbly, looked so feeble and forlorn, that Pet felt anything but anger at the intrusion.

"The fault, if any, was mine," she said, with a faint smile. "I believe I was dreaming. You wish to see my father?"

"This is where Colonel Forrest Flamsteed lives?"

"Yes; but just at present he is not at home. He had business which called him to town, directly after an early supper."

Though unconsciously to herself, a low sigh accompanied this statement, for the poor girl well knew what was the nature of the business which called the colonel to Nugget Camp, and knew, too, that it might be days before he returned, for her to nurse him back to strength and energy sufficient for another protracted debauch with the gamblers.

A deep sigh which was almost a groan came from the forest of gray hair with which the lips of the stranger were hidden, and he bore more heavily upon the stout staff, as though his limbs were scarcely able to support his weight.

"If I had only known!" he muttered. "I

was in town—I came from there only now—and now to learn that each weary step was taking me further and further away from the one man in all the world—but why should I trouble you with my sorrows? Forgive me, lady—I am not always so weak, but—

He staggered and seemed on the point of falling, when, with a little cry of alarm, Pet Flamsteed caught and supported him by one arm.

"You are ill—"

With a faint laugh, the old man straightened up, though he still trembled in every limb.

"It is nothing, dear lady. I am only weary and faint—no, why should I tell a lie, and to one so kind and charitable as you? You can read the truth in my face, in my clothes. It is more from hunger than fatigue that you see me so weak. For three days I have not broken my fast—"

A pitying cry from Pet's lips cut him short. Gently, yet bravely, supporting his trembling weight, she led him to the chair she had lately occupied, saying:

"Sit here, and I will bring you something—to be starving in the midst of plenty—why, it is horrible!"

He retained her hand and bent his head reverently over it until the gray beard touched the soft skin, and the tears came into the dark eyes of the little woman as she felt a drop of moisture fall upon her fingers.

"May kind Heaven reward you, dear lady, for your charity. If the prayers of a hardened sinner like me—"

With a hot flush the woman interrupted his broken speech.

"No more, I pray you, or you will make me ashamed that I can do no more. It is little at the best, but what there is you are more than welcome to."

"It is not much that I ask, dear lady," he said, with a gentle meekness that warmed her kind heart still more toward the poor wayfarer.

"A crust of bread and a sip of cold water, with a few moments' rest beneath your roof-tree, is all I require; then I will be strong enough to travel further in quest of the one man in this wild region who knows that no fault of his own could have brought his old friend so low—a homeless, penniless beggar!"

"That I am already sure of—but while I am talking you are starving," and Pet Flamsteed glided into the house, from whence soon came the rattle of dishes and the grateful scent of strong coffee.

In a wonderfully short space of time she returned and assisted the wayfarer to rise, begging him to lean upon her shoulder, leading him to where the table was covered with an ample supply of food.

Sinking into the chair provided for him, the old man bowed his head, and, in feeble, broken tones, said grace, so pathetic and so full of gratitude to her that the hot tears welled freely from the eyes of the little woman, and she was ready to believe that she was really entertaining an angel in the guise of a ragged beggar.

Though there was such a ravenous look in his eyes behind the colored glasses which he wore, the old man seemed ashamed to give free rein to his appetite, and, believing that her presence embarrassed him, Pet made an excuse which carried her into the kitchen, leaving him alone.

Not for long. Five minutes later that feeble voice was heard calling her, and she hastened back to find—not the feeble old beggar whom she had left, but a man whose face, extorted from her a cry of angry horror.

"Merciful heavens! You here!"

A low, taunting laugh broke from the lips of the rascal who had so cunningly deceived her—a laugh that sent the hot blood back to her heart, leaving her beautiful face as white as that of a corpse.

"Ay! Florence—or Mrs. Martin Luther Wesley, if you prefer the old title—I am here, I, Jasper Quigley, the man whom you threw over when a richer match offered itself—the man who, when the clouds lowered, perjured his soul to save you from the scaffold, foolishly fancying that you would at last reward his devotion as it deserved—the same whom you deserted for the second time, without word of thanks for all that he had endured and dared for you!"

There was no trace of old age nor decrepitude in his voice or figure now. The wig and full beard of false hair lay upon the table, the wrinkles which had so deeply lined his face were wiped away, the mass of dirty rags lay on the floor, and the pretended beggar stood before the astounded and half-stupefied woman, tall and straight, his smooth shaven face handsome with a sort of satanic beauty, his brilliant eyes aglow with a fire that almost curdled the blood in her veins.

For a brief space Pet Flamsteed—as she chose to call herself, though this scoundrel had given her a different name—stood like one frozen with horror at the totally unexpected vision from the past, but there was good blood in her veins, and her courage returned with the emergency.

"Whatever we may have been in the past, we are strangers now, Jasper Quigley," she cried, her voice resolute, her eyes flashing angrily. "There is a door—"

"Thanks for reminding me," he said, coolly, turning and closing the door, slipping the heavy wooden bar in place.

A cry, more of anger than of alarm, broke from her lips, and with a swift leap, she caught up a revolver which lay on a stand in the corner of the room, cocking and covering the rascal with the weapon, almost before he could divine her purpose.

"Open that door and leave this house, or I'll shoot you like the cowardly hound you really are!" she cried, and he could see by her flashing eyes and stern face that this was no idle threat.

Instinctively he cowered before her aim, showing his white teeth and snarling like a cornered wolf, rage and fear equally blended in his pale face.

"Be careful!" warningly cried Pet, reading his treacherous mind aright. "I am no longer the crushed and feeble girl whom you knew in the black days gone by. All earthly friends save one failed me then, in my time of need, and I have not forgotten the lesson those times taught me. I can take my own part now—as you will learn if you attempt what is in your evil mind. Quick as you are, a bullet is still swifter, and I can strike a bird on the wing—"

He checked her excited speech with a deprecatory gesture of his hand.

"Do not shoot—hear what I have to say—"

"Not a word!" was the stern reply. "There is the door. Remove that bar and leave before I count ten, or true as there is a Heaven above us, I will send a bullet through your vile heart—liar, traitor, coward!"

"Some day you will be sorry for this, my lady," the cornered rascal muttered, showing his teeth, but slowly edging toward the door in obedience to her stern commands. "Better let me tell my story now, with only your ears to listen, than for me to proclaim it elsewhere, with a hundred tongues to take it up as a delicious morsel—"

"Stop! Not another word! Leave this house before I can count ten, or you will never leave it save as a dead man!"

"Don't shoot, and I'll go," he growled, sullenly, with one hand fumbling at the bar, but with his eyes still watching her, as though in hopes of her relenting. "But you'll be sorry for refusing to let me have my say out—"

So far he spoke, then, instead of removing the bar, he crouched low down and made a sidelong leap toward the little woman, evidently trusting to taking her by surprise.

But Pet Flamsteed had not boasted in saying that she knew well how to use the weapon she held, and swift as were his movements, the revolver followed him, and the hammer fell. But no report followed. The cartridge failed to explode, and before she could cock the weapon again, the exultant villain had covered the space between them, and wrested the pistol from her grasp.

"Now you little spit-fire," he cried, with a satanic laugh, "it is my turn, and I'll not come down any easier on you for the precious fright you gave me just now!"

Desperately she struggled, but all in vain, for his powerful arms were wrapped around her form, pressing her to his breast with a savage gripe against which she was helpless.

"Time was when you were quite content to lie in my arms without near so much kicking and squirming, little one," he said, coarsely, at the same time running his hand over her person to satisfy himself that she possessed no other weapon which might endanger his life. "Come, now, be reasonable. You have had your innings. It is my turn now. I have waited for this hour for years, and now that I have fairly run my game to earth, you may be sure that I shall not run any unnecessary risks."

"Unhand me, villain—coward—"

"If hard words could kill, I would have been dust long since, little one," he said, laughing softly, but with little mirth in his tones. "Be sure I have not yet forgotten the old days when you cursed me up hill and down for the ruin of your life, as you chose to term it—"

As though stung sharply by these words, Pet renewed her desperate efforts to release herself, and great as was his strength, Jasper Quigley found that he needed it all for those first few minutes. But then the poor girl yielded, almost fainting, utterly worn out by that superhuman struggle to escape from the cruel toils.

Jasper Quigley drew a long breath of relief at this welcome respite, and there was hot anger in his tones as he said:

"Try and be sensible for a little while. I have come here for a good long talk, and I mean that you shall listen to me clear through, even if I have to tie you up hand and foot, and gag you into the bargain. Which shall it be? Will you listen quietly, or shall I serve you like a refractory calf?"

His speech gave Pet time to reflect, and she made good use of the opportunity. She knew that she was helplessly in the power of this scoundrel, as long as he chose to use force, and she knew enough of him in the days gone by to remember what a devil he could be when thoroughly angered, and that he would not hesitate

a moment in putting his threat into execution should she prove obstinate. Though, since the reign of Dashing Dell began in Nugget Camp, the callers at the Flamsteed ranch were few and far between, there was a remote hope that some one might chance that way and rescue her from this arch villain, and as the best she could do for the present, Pet resolved to temporize.

"Set me free. I will listen, since there is no escape."

CHAPTER IV.

JASPER QUIGLEY RECALLS THE PAST.

"Now you are talking like a sensible little girl I used to know in the old days," said Jasper Quigley, relaxing his grasp and suffering his almost paralyzed victim to sink into the chair beside the table. "Continue in that mood, and we will get along famously."

While speaking, he drew another chair forward and seated himself close before Pet Flamsteed, who shrunk away with an involuntary shudder of disgust and fear. His dark brows contracted as he noticed this, and he showed his teeth in a wolfish smile that chilled the blood in her veins.

"One would think I was the ghost of your murdered husband, from the manner in which you regard me now, and the way you took on when I first unmasked myself," he sneered.

"Not that," cried Pet, with a sudden return of courage. "Not that, but I was amazed at your audacity in daring to enter my presence after your base treachery of the past—"

"True love is ever audacious, little one," he retorted, with a sneering laugh, cutting her sentence short. "As for my having played the traitor, had I not done so, when the shadow of the scaffold lay across your path, the cruel rope of the hangman would long ago have done its dread work, and we would not now be holding this pleasant conversation."

For a moment Pet Flamsteed gazed at him, with flashing eyes and flushing cheeks, then her lip curled with utter scorn.

"Now, as then, your every word is a lie, base and black as your own cowardly heart, Jasper Quigley! My life was never in peril save when you gave your lying testimony—"

"Else I should not have perjured myself," was the cool interruption. "Ay!" he added, with an increase of fervor as he bent forward in his chair until Pet Flamsteed leaned far back to avoid his rapidly gesticulating hands. "Ay! I did commit perjury—I stained my soul with lie upon lie, for I knew that nothing less could save your life, and I was just insane enough then to believe that you would be thankful for the sacrifice I made. I fondly hugged to my breast the hope that the black gulf which lay between us would be bridged over, and that together we would forget that such clouds had ever gathered above our heads—"

He stopped short and settled back in his chair, the purple flush fading out of his face, a mocking light taking the place of the almost insane glare with which his eyes had been filled. For a brief space he was silent, and when he spoke again, it was with the old sneer which cut far more keenly than could the hottest of angry words.

"Bah! We are both old enough not to grow excited over trifles, yet the mere sight of your baby face sets my blood almost boiling, while I warrant your heart is fluttering like that of a silly maiden in receipt of her first love-letter."

"Say what you have to say, then leave me!" said Pet Flamsteed, her voice sounding strained and unnatural in her own ears.

A mocking laugh broke from the lips of the scoundrel. He saw that she was suffering the most exquisite torture, and he determined to prolong it to the uttermost, to make her drain the cup even to the last bitter dregs.

"There is time enough, little one. We have the whole night before us. There is no one about the house to interrupt us, and the worthy colonel," putting a sneering emphasis on the title, "is ere this deep in the mysteries of draw-poker, blissfully ignorant of the fact that one of his old and true friends is here, longing for his coming—"

"If you thought there was the slightest danger of that, you would be skulking away like some thieving wolf," indignantly cried Pet Flamsteed, her eyes aglow.

"The old rascal does strike swift and hard for a drunkard," said Jasper Quigley, with a short laugh, though the hot flush upon his smooth cheek told that the taunt had struck home.

At that insulting epithet, applied to the only man on earth whom she loved, Pet Flamsteed forgot the peril which threatened herself, and sprung from her chair, reaching out to grasp a pistol which hung against the wall; but once more the great agility of that unscrupulous scoundrel foiled her hopes.

His eye caught the weapon, and ere she could touch it, he grasped and flung it out through the open window, then his sinewy hands closed upon her shoulders and forced her back into the chair.

"No more such nonsense, little one," he cried, warningly, an ugly light flashing his dark eyes.

"You know my temper of old, and if you are wise, you will not get it beyond my control. Let it once break bonds, and the past will be most bitterly avenged!"

Those black eyes met his threatening gaze unflinchingly. Though white as marble, there was not a trace of fear in the little woman's face, not the slightest tremor in her voice.

"Strike—kill me if you will—life is not so precious that I need lower myself to beg for mercy at your hands."

Again that mocking laugh, harder to bear than a slap in the face.

"I do not doubt your courage, for you showed it plainly enough in those days, but you will please remember that there are still other methods of punishment, and if you try my patience too severely I may be driven to treating you after some such fashion."

Though the threat was somewhat clumsily expressed, Pet Flamsteed had no difficulty in comprehending his meaning. She knew, too, that he was none too good to put his threats into execution, but still not a trace of fear could be read in her marble-like features as her brilliant eyes gazed steadily at him. He gnawed his lips in silence for a moment, then said:

"A word to the wise is sufficient. Unless you drive me too far, I'd far rather give you a kiss than a blow—"

"Was it for this that you sought me out here in these wilds, where I hoped to bury myself forever from all those who knew me in the past?"

"Blame yourself for the digression, little one. No; I have something of more importance to say, as you will admit before I am through."

"Say it, then, and have done. I cannot breathe freely in your presence. You poison the air about you!"

More than the words she uttered, her tones stung him to the quick, despite his thick hide, they were so full of intense loathing and abhorrence. The great veins swelled out on his temples, and it was only by the utmost exercise of will that he suppressed the anger that almost choked him.

"You were not always so particular, little lady," he said, with a sickly smile. "Time was when you thought you could flourish only in that same atmosphere, when you would languish and droop when the light of my countenance was withdrawn from you if only for a day—"

"If so, that time was when I believed you a man, not a serpent of evil as I now know you to be."

"Are you altogether blameless for the change, if change there be?" was his swift, almost fierce retort. "Let us see; it will do us both no harm to recall a few reminiscences of the dead-and-gone past."

"Of what use—" began Pet, her face growing still more pale, as though she felt that the trial would be more than she could endure.

But the villain was merciless. He noted her change of countenance, and, with a malicious cruelty peculiarly his own, resolved to make her drain the cup to the very dregs. With a brutal insolence he cut her protest short.

"Spare your breath, Florence. I have come too long a journey, have spent too much time and money to lose even a morsel of my revenge. Besides you were kept in ignorance of a few of the most important events of those days, and while you are thus ignorant you could not fully comprehend what an invincible hand I hold in the game we are playing."

Pet Flamsteed knew that there was no use in making any further protest, and she sat in silence, cold and pale as a statue of marble, listening to his cruel speech.

"Long years ago, when I was but a boy and you little more than an infant, I fell in love with you, Florence, and I can still remember the boyish vow I made then to win and wear you for my wife when we should both be grown up. From that day I have never once lost sight of that resolution. At one time it seemed as though my vow was on the point of being fulfilled, and if all had gone well then it would have been better far for both of us."

"In good time I openly avowed my love for you, and you sent me into the seventh heaven of delight when you softly whispered that my passion was fully reciprocated—"

"I was but a child then—only fifteen years old—and did not know my own mind," was the cold interruption.

"Possibly not. You see I am willing to give you all the excuse for your treachery which you can possibly claim. Be it right or wrong, you solemnly betrothed yourself to me of your own free will, and for a few months we lived in a fool's paradise. Then your father made the discovery and kicked up a precious row over it. Not content with threats, he took to bribing my enemies to bring false tales against me—"

"They were well backed with proof, and when father dared you to take the matter into court, where the whole truth must come out, you shrunk from the test—"

"Because he was rich and I but a poor boy—"

"Say rather because you knew that your step's coat would be stripped off your back,

showing you for the wolf you really were, though you then passed for an honest and upright member of the Christian church!"

Jasper Quigley showed his teeth, but preferred to drop that part of the subject.

"Have your own way on that point; granting that all was true, I still have cause enough for hating both him and you—though the last has ever been beyond my power."

"Enough that your father had his will. Our engagement was broken, and within a month from that time the cunning scoundrel and hypocrite faced his cards and no longer sought to conceal the double game he had played so adroitly."

"One of his most eloquent pleas against our wedding was your extreme youth, but that no longer held good when the intended bridegroom was enormously rich instead of poor. And ere another month had crept around, the fact of your betrothal to Martin Luther Wesley was made public."

"At least there could be nothing said against his age, since that was almost equal to that of your father. He was so wealthy that it may be doubted whether he could have told the extent of his own riches. He was a religio-maniac, as nearly all of his people had been before him. He was never known to have committed even the slightest sin or peccadillo. And above all—in the estimation of your worthy father—he was one to be easily influenced, not to say fleeced, by any one who had fairly gained his confidence—"

"Which knowledge accounts for the assiduity with which you cultivated his acquaintance!" exclaimed Pet Flamsteed, her red lip curling afresh. "Thanks for explaining what has often perplexed me."

"Have patience, little one, and you will see some other and still greater mysteries solved," laughed the rascal, nothing abashed. "I confess that I thought to make my dear friend Martin furnish the sinews of war, but that was only the least important of my reasons for cultivating him. What the main one was you shall soon see."

"Naught creditable to your heart or brain, of that I am sure," was the cutting retort.

"I fear the first article was forgotten when I was created," laughed Jasper Quigley. "Whether I lacked the other, or failed to make good use of them, I leave you to judge when I shall have written *finis* to the story I set out to tell."

"You have not forgotten the last interview which we had, before your marriage with Martin Luther Wesley?"

"No; nor that you professed perfect resignation to the inevitable. We were never fitted for other than friends, you admitted; our dispositions were so near alike!"

"Because I knew that it was inevitable, because I knew that unless I dissembled, you would shun me, and poison the weak mind of Wesley against me, either of which would have proven disastrous to the plans which I had formed."

"Devil—cunning, treacherous scoundrel!"

"If so, who made me such?" was the fierce query. "You and yours! If those wrongs recoil upon your head now, blame me not, but lay the fault at your own door!"

More than ever like those of an enraged wild beast, his eyes glowered at Pet Flamsteed, who made no reply, for she saw that this recital of what he fancied were the wrongs she and hers had heaped upon him, was working him up to a dangerous pitch of fury. Only after a desperate struggle did he succeed in obtaining the mastery over his passions.

"You are not wise to rake up those ashes," he said, in a hoarse, strained voice, seeming to forget that he had forced it all upon her. "It is all I can do to keep myself within bounds without your taunting me."

Still the little woman made no reply, and he continued his retrospect of the past with a more natural tone.

"I will be perfectly frank with you, little one. When I told you that I was fully resigned to your throwing me over in favor of Wesley, I lied. Never before had I loved you as then, never was I more determined to win and wear you, sooner or later. But I was no fool. I saw that you had forgotten your short-lived fancy for me, that you were dazzled by the vision of countless wealth and luxury which was promised you as the bride of Wesley. I knew that you loved him no more than you did me, if so well; but I also knew that you would wed him, if you both lived until the day set for the ceremony, let me say what I might."

"At first I was strongly tempted to kill the whining hypocrite, and even had all my movements planned in accordance, but then I fancied I saw a scheme by which I might not only gain my desired ends without danger to my own life, but at the same time fully avenge the bitter wrongs I had suffered, and so I donned a smiling mask, and appeared to accept my fate not only with resignation, but even delight."

"Still I could not bring myself to be present at the wedding, and the better to hide the truth and keep those who knew of our former connection from saying that chagrin made me unequal to the task, I contrived that an accident

should occur to lay me up until the worst was over."

"This part of my plan came near succeeding too well, for I was laid up for several months, and had a narrow escape from the grave."

"If you had only died then!" exclaimed Pet Flamsteed, her eyes aglow, her fingers tightly interlocked.

Jasper Quigley laughed shortly ere he resumed:

"It would have been lucky for both you and Martin Luther, no doubt, for all that transpired in the days to come, was carefully elaborated if not concocted while I lay there on what many believed was to be my death-bed. But I was not among them, for I felt that I could not die until I had sipped deep of revenge—nor did I."

"The house of your husband was the first at which I called when I regained strength sufficient to leave my room. Your first greeting was timid and cold, for you could not believe that I had forgiven your treachery so easily; but I had studied my part well, and ere long succeeded in banishing your last doubts."

A bitter, gasping groan broke from the paling lips of the little woman, as his words recalled the terrible past.

"Ay! You played your traitorous part well!"

"Did I not?" he laughed, in satanic glee, his eyes burning with an unholy delight, his face transformed into that of a veritable fiend.

"But little wonder, considering the enormous stake for which I was playing."

"I lost little time in getting to work. I had an easy task where Wesley alone was concerned, for he was suspicious by nature, and not overwell stocked with brains. It was not hard to pull the wool over his eyes, and before I had been at work for a single month, he was ready to believe aught I might tell him in your disfavor."

"You helped me amazingly in my work, thanks to your love of gayety, your thirst for flattery and adoration—"

"As heaven hears me!" cried the tortured woman, her clasped hands uplifted, "I never sinned against him, even in thought—not even when you made me believe that he was living a double life—that he was as great a sinner as he seemed to be saint!"

"There is no need of your assuring me of that, though few indeed of your friends even give you so much credit," the villain said, quickly. "I kept such a close watch over you that the least misstep on your part must instantly have been known to me. But all the same, it was my policy to make your husband believe the worst, and I need not say that I succeeded."

"These terrible suspicions made him morose, and that was another step taken in my cunning scheme, for it gave color to the hints I breathed in your ears—"

"Why recall all this?" cried the tortured woman, in a tone of bitter anguish. "Have I not suffered enough for whatever wrong you fancy I may have committed against you? Have mercy—leave me—"

"Ay! such mercy as you showed me when you held my whole future in your hands!" he cried, in a tone of suppressed fury. "I love to see your cheeks turn pale, your eyes fill with the hunted look which I first saw in them when you were confronted with the cold and ghastly corpse of your murdered husband."

With a desperate effort Pet Flamsteed rallied her fainting spirits, and with flashing eyes she said:

"If murdered, it was your hand that killed him—your base lies that drove him to the grove of a suicide—"

"It was not suicide—he was murdered, and by your hand!"

CHAPTER V.

JASPER QUIGLEY FACES HIS CARDS.

FOR a moment or two after Jasper Quigley uttered these words, Pet Flamsteed stared at him as though unable to comprehend his meaning. Then, as the devilish smile deepened on his face, and his white teeth gleamed between his parted lips, she turned pale as death, and managed to falter:

"Murdered—and by my hand?"

"Ay! though I perjured myself to save your pretty throat from the rough hands of the hangman, when, if I had made known the truth, the silent scorn which was shown you by those who once were proud to be numbered among your dearest friends, would have changed to a storm of execration—"

A sudden change came over the little woman, and a short, mocking laugh broke from her lips, cutting his speech short.

"Bah! For the moment I forgot that you were a self-confessed perjurer. So this is the mighty weapon which you hold over my poor head? Really, I expected something less clumsy from one of your boasted accomplishments!"

Jasper Quigley winced, though he strove hard to conceal the fact, but he as quickly rallied.

"Pray do not judge me too soon. I have not

finished my narrative yet, and ere that comes to an end, you may see cause for altering your opinion of my abilities."

"I beg you to bring it to an end as soon as possible, for it is growing most wearisome," said the little woman, hiding a yawn with one plump hand.

Jasper Quigley laughed softly, as though amused by her coolness.

"I shall not detain you much longer, little one. I mean to face my cards on the table and let you see for yourself that I really hold an invincible hand."

"In less than six months after your marriage with Martin Luther Wesley, my plans were complete, and only lacked the one finishing touch, which I gave with a degree of pleasure which I may safely leave you to imagine."

"I had succeeded in poisoning his mind against you, and making you believe him a devil of evil rather than the holy saint the foolish fellow thought himself. I admit frankly that nearly every word which I breathed into your ears and his, during those busy days, were lies, without the slightest foundation in truth."

"If you ask my object, that is easy told. I hoped to drive him into seeking a divorce from you, on the proof of your infidelity which I had so adroitly manufactured, yet without my agency appearing in the affair, no matter how closely it might be looked into. But in that I failed. Not that the poor fool doubted the truth of what was laid before him, nor that he loved you too dearly to drag your fair name in the mire, but because the doing so would be to cast a stain upon the name of which he was so proud, because the shadow of your sin would be reflected upon himself."

"Though I do not mind admitting now that all the evidence which I furnished him was manufactured out of whole cloth, as the saying goes, had he brought the suit for divorce as I repeatedly urged him to do not a judge or jury in the land but what would have granted him the dissolution asked. And so had you acted on my advice. But you each refused to profit by my industry and ingenuity, and I was forced to alter my plans. If I could not marry the divorced wife of Martin Luther Wesley, then I would win his widow."

"And for that you murdered him!" cried the woman, her eyes widely distended with horror.

"He did not commit suicide—"

"No—as none should know better than yourself," was the swift retort. "I intended to kill the poor fool, but you forestalled me—"

"A lie! as base as your own black heart!"

"Of course!" the rascal said, with a sneer. "I did not expect that you would acknowledge the deed. You would be very foolish to do so, even to so true a friend and ally as I. But denial upon denial, though piled as high as yonder mountain, cannot alter stern facts, and I hold here the proof of your crime—proof so positive that even now, after all these years, I could bring you to the scaffold, simply by publishing the evidence signed by your dead husband!"

Jasper Quigley paused with these words, as though for a reply from the woman whose wild eyes were staring so strangely into his glowing orbs; but not a sound came from her lips. She sat like one turned to stone. Her face was white and ghastly. Her limbs seemed rigid. Was this conscious guilt, or simply stupor brought on by hearing this monstrous charge?

Watching her as closely as a hungry cat might watch a mouse just beyond its reach, and moistening his lips with his tongue, as though loth to lose even the slightest taste of the revenge he had waited and plotted for through all these years, Jasper Quigley spoke once more:

"You remember that he was taken suddenly ill, and how positively he refused your kind offer to act as his nurse. He would give you no reason for your refusal, though you asked him; but that same night he sent for me—poor fool! he believed me his best if not his only friend on earth—and told me a wondrous tale."

"There is no need for me to repeat it at length, as he told it, for, judged by the light of after events, you must have known it all, even before it came to my ears. Enough that he solemnly assured me that he was dying of slow poison, administered by your hand—"

"No! no! he did not—he could not have believed that!" cried, almost shrieked, the tortured woman, her face distorted with horror. "It is another of your horrible lies! Say that you are lying—that he, my poor husband, did not believe me capable of such a monstrous crime!"

Jasper Quigley laughed harshly, bending forward and rubbing his hands together with a satanic glee written upon every feature. Now he was enjoying the revenge for which he had waited so long.

Pet Flamsteed saw this devilish grin, and with a strenuous effort of will she recovered her composure, resolved to foil him so far as lay in her power.

Jasper Quigley saw the change, and read its meaning aright, but he was not greatly disconcerted. Though she might hide it in part, he knew that she was suffering enough to satisfy even his malignancy.

"Whether true or false, be sure that your

husband believed the grave charge which he confided to me in secret, first exacting my solemn pledge that I should never betray his confidence, unless a certain contingency was to arise; of which more hereafter."

"You may refuse me credit for so doing, but though he was playing directly into my hands, this accusation shocked me so greatly that I tried my best to convince him that he was wronging you; but you remember how obstinate he could be when he once took a notion into his head, and all I could say failed to shake his belief. And when he went on to give me his reasons for so believing, even I could not deny that the case looked terribly black against you."

"I will not pain you by repeating them now, for they are all set down in careful detail in the document which I now hold, and which you shall read before this interview comes to an end. Enough that they are clear enough to condemn you before any impartial jury—where you shall have the chance to confute them, unless you and I can come to terms."

"There was only one other let into the terrible secret, and he only partially; the family lawyer, whom Wesley summoned for the purpose of drawing his will. Even he would have been kept in ignorance, had he not flatly refused to draw up the instrument as Wesley desired it. As it was, the honest old fellow tried to defend you, and in doing so, angered Wesley so deeply that he sent him away and intrusted the writing to me."

"You remember what the will which was read at the time contained; well, that was of my doing. Wesley never dictated that closing clause, which said that you should forfeit the wealth left you unless you married me, thus making full if tardy reparation for the wrong done me before your marriage with him. And yet, greatly as you were angered and surprised then, your indignation would have been increased tenfold had I produced the genuine will."

"That left you one dollar with which to buy mourning for your dead husband! And if any person should express surprise at the amount of the legacy, you were enjoined to tell them all that occurred on a certain evening—which was the one on which he swore you administered the first dose of poison to him in his medicine. Surely the alteration I made was far preferable to that!"

"No—ten thousand times no!" cried Pet, her eyes flashing. "For then there would have been something to work by—a clew, if never so slight, to the mystery which every line of that atrocious production shadowed forth, which cast a frightful cloud of suspicion over me, and caused all my fair-weather friends to shrink away as though the taint of leprosy had fallen upon me!"

"It was all very sad, no doubt," added Jasper Quigley, with a repetition of that sneering laugh. "Very sad, but by no means as bad as it might have been, had I thought best to press matters to a crisis, instead of contenting myself with throwing out an occasional hint and dropping a word or two here and there where I felt sure they would do the most good."

"And by doing so you ruined your own plans. Despite your diabolical cunning, you could not entirely conceal the double part you were playing. Rumors of the truth came to our ears, and to that fact you owe the cold reception you received when you came to us with your crocodile tears and fulsome expressions of sympathy."

Jasper Quigley listened to this swift speech with a smile, but there was an ugly light in his eyes which belied the impression he wished to convey.

"That I was playing a double part, of course you knew when I gave my evidence before the coroner's jury which sat on the corpse of your husband—"

"It was false from beginning to end—the evidence you gave them!" cried Pet Flamsteed, once more rallying. "That, even more than the cunning hints which you scattered around on all sides, centered the suspicion upon me—"

Jasper Quigley cut her passionate words short with an impatient wave of his hand.

"False, of course, since you were acquitted, or rather not charged with the crime at all, since the jury brought in a verdict of suicide."

A wild light suddenly filled the dark eyes of the little woman, and rising from her chair, she raised one hand above her head, speaking swiftly:

"Until this day I never once doubted but that verdict was founded on truth—now, as heaven hears me! I believe my poor husband was foully murdered, and that you, Jasper Quigley, was his cowardly assassin!"

The arch-villain laughed shortly, but never even changed color at this emphatic accusation.

"Doubtless you would be glad to believe as much, and still more happy could you induce the world to share in the impression. It was murder, not suicide, and I hold the blasting proofs—evidence which poor Martin furnished me before his death. He knew it all, knew that he was dying from poison, knew whose the hand which was cunningly and at the same

time relentlessly cutting short his thread of life—"

"Yet he kept you by him—he did not denounce you?"

"Why should he deprive himself of the one friend left him in his dire extremity?" asked Jasper Quigley, with uplifted eyebrows and wondering countenance.

Surely he believed in the truth of the terrible revelation he was making, else he was a wonderful actor!

The poor woman saw that he held all the trumps in this desperate game, and with a sickening faintness at her heart, she sunk back into her chair, staring at the exultant wretch with a vague dread of the blow which she felt could not be much longer in falling.

"After all, there was something of the hero in the poor devil," resumed Jasper Quigley, closely watching the effects of his cunningly chosen words. "He knew that he was being poisoned, yet he made no sign save to the one true friend whom he knew he could implicitly trust. He refused to take any antidote, refused to call in medical assistance, or even to refuse the draught which his loving wife was careful to bring and hold to his lips evening after evening—"

"Villain—demon of evil!" shrieked the poor woman, driven almost beside herself. "Say that you are lying now—Merciful heavens! surely that was not the vehicle of death!"

"Why ask me?" laughed the scoundrel, surprise written on every feature. "I have only surmise to guide me—you must have certainty."

With a bitter groan the tortured girl sunk down in her chair, burying her face in her hands, convulsive sobs shaking her slight frame in every fiber. It was a sight to move a stoic, yet Jasper Quigley gloated over her agony, licking his lips and rubbing his hands together in devilish glee at the exquisite torture he was inflicting upon this frail woman.

"If not," he continued, in that cold, even tone that was so exasperating, "then poor Wesley died under a mournful delusion. I was with him on the day which was the last his assassin allowed him, and he had a strong presentiment that he should never see the sun rise again. When he told me this, I laughed at him, but one cold reproof was sufficient to check me, for, after all, my mirth was forced, and something told me that he spoke naught but the truth."

"It was then that he told me in plain words what before he had only vaguely hinted at: that you were poisoning him!"

The arch-villain paused here as though in hopes of witnessing another passionate outburst on the part of his tortured victim, but only a low moan escaped her lips. For the time being she seemed utterly crushed. Yet he saw that she was not beyond the reach of suffering, and with devilish malignancy he pressed the barbed arrow still deeper into the bleeding wound.

"I implored him to call in a doctor, even at that late stage of the case, but he coldly refused. 'No,' he said, 'I have weighed the matter well, and considered it in all its bearings. Life is not worth the trouble of living, especially since life to me means death to her. A doctor would see at once that I was being poisoned, and then the horrible truth must come out. Though she hates me and is surely compassing my death, I shall never lift a hand against her, unless she tries to profit by my death in one certain way—then I will turn in my grave to avenge my wrongs.'

"Those were his very words. I have not forgotten one of them, for the terrible fulfillment of the belief he expressed that day, imprinted them indelibly upon my memory."

"He gave me then the paper which I have already alluded to more than once, swearing me to the strictest secrecy, unless after his death, you were to attempt to marry again; then I was to produce it and let the law take its course."

"That same night he died. You know what followed. The traces of poison could not be concealed, and there was an inquest. As one of his most intimate friends, as well as one of the last who had seen him alive, I was summoned before the jury, to throw what light upon the sad affair I could. You know how I did my best to screen you, knowing as I did that you had murdered him, having that damning proof in my breast-pocket at the very moment when I was staining my soul with perjury on your behalf—"

"Stabbing my honor and casting suspicion upon me with your every word!" cried Pet, bitterly.

Jasper Quigley laughed softly, but made no direct reply to this charge.

"Thanks to that evidence, the verdict was one of suicide while suffering from a painful illness that temporarily rendered him insane. But few there were who believed this, and when the strange conditions of the will were read, that vague suspicion became almost a certainty, and at last I began to taste the sweet fruits of my long and cunning plotting, for your friends fell away from you, and the papers

began to contain significant hints and innuendoes, which were but thinly veiled.

"It was then that I heaped coals of fire upon your head, and proved that you had one friend left who was brave enough to stand by you through thick and thin. And how did you requite me?"

"By spurning you from me like the treacherous cur that you were and are still!" cried Pet Flamsteed, with the energy of utter desperation. "I had my suspicion that you were a snake in the grass, even before you stood before that jury and while pretending to be defending me—me, whom not even a breath of doubt had been cast upon until then—you tried to cover me with shame and dishonor! But when you came and urged me to fulfill the horrible condition which he—my murdered husband—had imposed upon me, then the scales fell entirely from my eyes, and I saw you for what you really were."

"Yes, you spoke plain enough then," said Jasper Quigley, only the deeper glow in his snake-like eyes betraying that he felt the sting of her passionate words. "And plainer still were the actions of your worthy father. You summoned him—"

"And he dealt out to you the punishment your insolent threats so richly deserved."

"Yes," was the cool reply. "As I said some time ago, the doughty colonel strikes swift and sure when his passions are fairly aroused. He knocked me down and pitched me headlong out at the door. I was picked up by a friend, and taken home. For a week I lay senseless; for three months longer I was confined to my bed, and it was a month longer before I could leave the house. My recovery was retarded, no doubt, by the information given me by a friend, that you and your father had left the city, vanished, no one seemed to know where."

"As soon as I was able to get abroad, I set inquiries afoot, but without any success. You had disappeared as completely as though the earth had opened to swallow you up. Day after day, month after month, year in and year out, I sought for you, only to chance upon a clew after I had given up all hope of ever again meeting either of you in the flesh. That clew proved to be a true one, and I came here to find you passing as the maiden daughter of Colonel Forrest Flamsteed, the heiress of a minor-millionaire, and far more lovely than before."

"I watched my chance, and when the coast was clear, I put in an appearance, as you know. And now to business."

"In all these days I have never once forgotten the solemn vow which I took as a lad. I swore that you should be my wife, and I mean to keep that oath, or else send you to the gallows for the murder by poison of Martin Luther Wesley!"

"It is false—but even if true, even were you to possess the power of which you boast, I would defy you!" was the swift retort. "Better death—even such a shameful death—than life coupled with such a fiend as you!"

"You doubt my power?" asked Jasper Quigley, taking a note-book from his pocket and extracting therefrom a folded paper. "Let this convince you, then. Read!" and he held the document close before her face.

Almost by instinct she took in the full purport of the writing, which she saw was in the hand of her dead husband, and for a few moments she stared at it like one petrified. But then, as Jasper Quigley made as though he would restore the damning evidence to its hiding place, a wild cry broke from her lips, and she sought to tear it from his grasp.

With a mocking laugh he foiled her attempt. "On the day when you become my wife, then you may—"

"That day will never come, villain!" she cried, fiercely.

"It will—it must! Refuse, and I will take you from here with irons on your limbs, to answer for the murder of your husband. I have the necessary papers here. You are doomed!" and carried away by his long-pent up passions, he caught her in his arms, kissing her repeatedly. A shriek, a report, and the villain fell to the floor with a hollow groan!

CHAPTER VI.

GOLD MASK TRUMPS THE TRICK.

ALMOST crushed by that fierce embrace, Pet Flamsteed fell to the floor with Jasper Quigley, when that sharp report rung out, but almost as quickly she recovered herself. The dastardly villain lay as he fell, quivering convulsively, but seemingly slain outright, his tenacious gripe relaxing. The little woman freed herself and arose, casting one glance toward the open window, before which still hung a filmy cloud, through which like a shadowy phantom shone a head, then staggered over to the bed, on which she fell, more than half-fainting.

Like one in a dream, she heard something fumbling at the door, and with a vague sense of danger, she fought back the dethly faintness which assailed her, and rose to her feet just in time to see a strange figure leap foremost into the room, through the open window.

A gasping cry of terror broke from her lips,

for though they had never met before, she had no difficulty in recognizing the intruder, and she felt that she had been saved from one enemy only to fall into the power of another still more to be dreaded.

The stranger seemed to read her fears and stopped short, crossing his arms over his chest, saying in a gentle tone:

"Fear not, lady. That pitiful scoundrel shall insult you no more."

"You have killed him?" faltered Pet.

"No; though it would have been nothing more than his foul conduct deserved," was the quick response. "No; I only creased the villain. He will be fit for fresh rascality in a few minutes, unless I conclude that he is safer put out of the way. I was strongly tempted to bore his brain, when you cried for help, but I do not love bloodshed—"

Something in her wide-opened eyes caused him to leave the sentence unfinished, and the little woman impulsively said:

"And yet—"

A low, mellow laugh checked her, and seemingly not a little amused by the confusion which overcame her as she realized the interpretation which alone could be placed upon her surprise, the stranger added:

"And yet I am the ruthless, blood-drinking demon to whom men have given the title of Gold Mask—was not that what you intended saying, lady?"

Low-voiced and pleasantly as he spoke, Pet Flamsteed shrunk away from him, for she had heard that this man's mirth was far more to be dreaded than even his rage.

A strange but gallant picture the noted outlaw made, as he stood in the light of the candle, which still burned upon the table; a picture which once seen could not easily be forgotten.

From head to foot he was one blaze of gold and silver lace, interspersed with numerous golden nuggets and coins of all sizes and denominations. Over his face he wore a mask of beaten gold, richly chased and engraved, bearing a curious monogram composed of the letters G. M. Even the high-topped boots which incased his feet were of a rich yellow, while the weapons in the gold-embroidered belt which encircled his trim waist, were heavily plated with the precious metal.

He stood but little if any above the medium height of man; his form light-built, yet trim and compact, seemingly endowed with more than common strength and agility. His small hands were incased in fawn-skin gloves, smoked to a rich yellow, and elaborately worked with gold thread; in one word, he seemed one mass of the precious metal from head to foot, as he stood motionless in the candle-light.

"Evil report travels far and fast, and I see that you recognize me, lady—or rather the demon rumor has pictured me. Yet there is an old adage which says that the devil is not near so black as painted, and even Gold Mask has not entirely escaped the venomous tongue of slander. Bad enough I may be—who in all this wide world but has some weak point which the finger of malice cannot search out?—yet I am not the utter fiend which they say. Bah!" and he interrupted himself with a short, bitter laugh, as though scolding the momentary weakness he had displayed. "Why should I attempt to defend myself? Who will believe me? Must surely not an angel pure and stainless as yourself, lady?"

Again Gold Mask abruptly checked himself, as he saw how Pet Flamsteed shrunk away from his passionate words. For an instant he was silent, then, with a low laugh, he turned away and bent over the prostrate figure of Jasper Quigley.

Parting the blood-saturated hair above one temple, he pressed the tip of one finger against the skull which had been laid bare by the bullet tearing its way through the scalp, then arose once more.

"The rascal is stunned, not killed. I did not think my aim had failed me, though I should not grieve very much had such been the case. By his own confession the rascal richly deserves death."

"You know him, then?" faltered the little woman.

For one instant Gold Mask hesitated, then made reply:

"So far as my knowledge goes, we never met before this, and all I know of him, was gleaned from his own admission."

Paler than ever grew the face of Pet Flamsteed, and her tones were full of a new fear as she stammered:

"You heard him, then—you were listening—"

"Remember, lady, that I am Gold Mask—that is to say one who has broken every law, committed every crime in the decalogue, times without number, together with a score of others even more heinous, if that may be, created for my especial benefit by those pure and holy ones who can afford to cast a stone at such a god-forsaken monster!"

Bitterly he spoke, and with such emphasis that the poor terrified girl shrunk away with her hands.

Gold Mask noticed this and, instantly his

tones changed. As though to give her time to recover a portion of her shaken strength, he once more bent over the form of Jasper Quigley, and taking the weapons from his person, cast them out into the night by way of the open window through which he had effected an entrance.

"It is only one more sin to be recorded against Gold Mask, lady," he resumed, lightly. "Besides the other crimes with which I stand charged, that of eavesdropping is hardly worth mentioning."

"You heard all, then—heard that man accuse me of such a monstrous crime?" faltered Pet Flamsteed.

"Yes, and I tell you now, as I told myself while that despicable wretch was torturing you with his foul speech, that it was one tissue of lies from beginning to end."

He spoke so earnestly, so positively, that the poor girl drew a fresh stock of strength and courage from the assurance. She forgot what manner of man this was, for the time being seeing in him a trusting friend who still had faith in her truth and innocence, when all else on earth appeared to have forsaken her in her extremity.

"As Heaven is my judge! you do me no more than justice!" she cried, her pale cheeks flushing and her eyes aglow. "I know now that I sinned in wedding a man whom I did not, could not love, but that is as far as my sin went. I was a true and faithful wife to him, and though I loved gayety and amusements, I was willing to give them all up if he wished. I begged my husband to suffer me to stay by his bedside and nurse him when he fell sick, but he coldly sent me away. He was always cold, and so I never even dreamed that he doubted me—least of all could I think that he was even then condemning me in his heart as a—murderer!"

With a choking sob she brought out the horrible word, but the bare utterance seemed to turn her faint at heart, and covering her eyes with both hands, she staggered back and would have fallen only for the swift leap and ready grasp of Gold Mask.

That embrace proved the best of restoratives, and with an involuntary shudder as she remembered who and what was this man, Pet Flamsteed released herself. Gold Mask drew back no less quickly, and it was clear that his pride was touched by that involuntary exhibition of repugnance.

"Pardon my daring to touch you, lady, even with the tip of one gloved finger," he said, bowing low and speaking in a hard and mocking tone. "I would not have so offended, but I feared you were falling, and acted on the impulse of the moment lest you should receive some injury."

The poor, half-creed little woman murmured something, she scarcely knew what, but Gold Mask had already turned away to where Jasper Quigley still lay motionless in a pool of his own blood, and did not appear to hear her words.

Bending over the senseless villain, he opened his coat and vest, searching both garments thoroughly, not only the pockets, but the lining and each fold where a paper could by any possible means be concealed. Not only once but repeatedly, and when he rose erect once more, Pet Flamsteed fancied he wore an air of deep annoyance, though the golden mask concealed his face from her eyes.

Standing beside the table and rapidly running his eyes over the papers thus secured, Gold Mask suddenly uttered a low exclamation and glanced swiftly toward the little woman.

She impulsively started forward with outstretched hand, but stopped as abruptly when he drew back, making as though he would conceal the document. This hesitation, however, was but momentary; then he said:

"After all, what matter? You know what an unscrupulous scoundrel he is, and it is not hard for such to deceive honest men—or it may be a base forgery—he may have gotten it only in hopes of frightening you into making terms with him. The contemptible villain is quite capable of such a trick."

Paler and still more white grew the face of the poor girl as Gold Mask continued speaking so rapidly, and he saw that he was increasing rather than allaying her fears. So, as the shortest and easiest solution of the difficulty, he placed the paper in her hands.

These trembled so violently that the paper fluttered like a leaf in a brisk breeze, but Pet managed to see that the contents were not what her fears surmised, and she grew more calm.

Yet at any other time or under any different circumstances, she would have been filled with horror and indignation, for the paper which she held in her hands was a warrant for her arrest, to all appearance perfectly regular and legally issued, charging her with murder.

"A dangerous weapon in the hands of an unscrupulous rascal like that," said Gold Mask, with a side glance at the still motionless figure of Jasper Quigley. "I am almost sorry that I wasted my lead. Such a dastard is not fit to live."

"And still less fit to die," murmured Pet Flamsteed, as she followed the direction of his

glance, then averted her eyes with a shudder of strong aversion. "You did not—you heard him speak of another paper—"

Here her voice failed her, but Gold Mask comprehended her meaning readily enough.

"No, I did not find it. Either he was lying, or he has the paper written by your husband safely hidden. In either case I do not think you need borrow trouble on that score, lady. The dirty scoundrel will not trouble you again, after the hint which I intend giving him. I know that what he said was all false, for his face was almost as easily read as your own, and upon every feature of that was imprinted innocence. As for this precious document, it shall cause you no further annoyance—see!"

As he spoke, Gold Mask held the warrant in the flame of the candle until it was entirely consumed, then scattered the light ashes with a single breath.

"Now, lady, to explain how I came to be at hand in time to foil that scoundrel. Evil and all that is vile as men accuse me of being, I do not make a practice of eavesdropping young ladies and their visitors, but I believed that I had good reasons for suspecting that villain of meaning me harm, and to counteract his mischievous designs, I played the spy upon him. I followed him here, and when I could gain a position from whence I could see and hear him, he was insulting you.

"Perhaps I should have at once beaten a retreat, but I am glad now that I did not. When he added violence to abuse, I could restrain my indignation no longer, and so put a quietus to the affair."

"And earned the heartfelt thanks which I have been too backward in giving—"

With a graceful wave of his hand, Gold Mask checked her.

"The knowledge of having served you, even in such a trifle, is ample reward, lady—"

Gold Mask paused abruptly as he saw a look of horror come into the face of the little woman, while she cried:

"Look out—he'll kill you—"

Jasper Quigley had recovered his consciousness, and for several minutes had been fully aware of what was going on, though he still lay motionless as a dead man, his eyes barely opened wide enough to take in the scene. While lying thus, he heard the thinly-veiled threats of the outlaw, and readily interpreted them. He realized his danger, and when he saw the warrant burned by Gold Mask, he resolved to have swift and sure revenge.

Though the outlaw had removed the weapons from his belt and cast them out at the window, Jasper Quigley felt that a keen and serviceable knife which he habitually wore in a sheath at the back of his neck, had escaped the notice of his enemy, and taking advantage of a moment when the face of Pet Flamsteed was bent downward, while Gold Mask stood with his back toward him, he drew the weapon from its place of concealment, then leaped lightly to his feet, hoping to plunge the deadly weapon to the hilt in the outlaw's back before he could defend himself.

But Gold Mask was not so easily handled. Even before the wild cry and wilder words broke from the lips of Pet Flamsteed, his keen and well-trained ears warned him of impending danger. Swift as thought he wheeled, at the same time leaping actively to one side, thus foiling the vicious thrust which Jasper Quigley made.

Then out shot one gloved hand, and alighting full upon the throat of the would-be murderer, knocked him clear off his feet and headlong to the floor. Before he could make a move to arise, half-stunned as he was, Gold Mask was upon him, wresting the knife from his grasp and pressing the keen point against his throat until the red blood began to ooze forth.

Never in all his evil life did Jasper Quigley stand so near to death's door as he did at that moment. Like balls of living fire glowed the orbs of the outlaw. Tighter still grew his vise-like gripe on the throat of the dastardly villain, until Jasper Quigley turned purple in the face, his swollen tongue protruding in a most horrible manner.

So utterly frightful was the sight that Pet Flamsteed started forward with an involuntary cry, but then as she remembered what bitter cause she had for fearing and hating the strangling wretch, she recoiled, covering her face with her hands, trembling like a leaf.

Still, her action had saved the life of Jasper Quigley. Gold Mask turned his head at her cry, and instantly relaxed his deadly grasp. None too soon. Another minute of that suffocating pressure, and Jasper Quigley would never again have drawn the breath of life.

Even as it was, some little time elapsed before he regained the power of motion, and a still greater period ere he could stand upon his feet without falling.

Until then, Gold Mask said never a word, but stood over the trembling wretch stern and cold, judge and executioner both. But when he did speak, his words were sharp and to the point.

"Jasper Quigley, I know you now. By your own confession you richly deserve death—and

death would have been your portion this very night, only for the clemency of this lady. But bear this in mind: you are only reprieved, not pardoned. If you ever molest this lady again, either directly or indirectly, your doom is sealed, for I swear to hunt you down to the death your crimes so richly merit, even though you seek to hide from me in the very bowels of the earth. I am Gold Mask. If you have never heard of me and mine, go ask the first man whom you see, and learn whether I am wont to make idle threats.

"If you are a wise man, you will delay not, but shake the dust of this region off your feet, and pull out for a more salubrious climate. I give you one week; if you are here at the end of that time, there will be a funeral, with you as the chief mourner!"

Pushing the trembling scoundrel to the door, Gold Mask removed the bar and flung the door back. Turning Jasper Quigley squarely from him, he dealt him a kick so forcible that he was shot out into the open air as though from a catapult.

Cool and equable as before, Gold Mask turned toward Pet Flamsteed, his voice soft and musical.

"I feel sure you have nothing further to dread from that fellow, but I will have a close watch kept over him while he remains in these parts, and his first attempt to make trouble will be the last."

Pet Flamsteed murmured her thanks, but the words were hardly audible. Though she had borne up with remarkable fortitude, considering all that she had been called on to endure, overtaken nature was now beginning to take its revenge, and her limbs could scarcely support her weight.

There was a light in the eyes of the noted outlaw that told he was reluctant to leave her, but with more delicacy than might have been expected, he shortened his leave-taking.

Bowing over her little hand until the gold lips touched it, he turned and left the house, while poor Pet, her strength of both body and mind deserting her of a sudden, staggered to the bed, falling upon it as she lost her senses.

CHAPTER VII.

"THE WALL-EYED PIKE O' THE PEAK."

"WHOO—ee! Hyar we come, back-fin up an' tail a-wiggin'! Fish-trap open all ready fer business! Hunt your holes, ye little minners, fer yar comes the scaly whirlpool o' death an' destruction—the gamest fish that ever swallered a hook, fit a gar or sucked in a young goslin! Cl'ar the rifles, fer yar I be—Barnacle Bildad Tholuck, the Wall-eyed Pike o' the Peak—whoo—EE!"

Many a queer and gasconading challenge had rung through the confines of the "Oasis," pet saloon and gambling rooms of Nugget Camp, by long-haired and wild-eyed disciples of the pick and spade, moved thereto by the all-powerful bug-juice which transformed a peasant into a king, and made the lowliest brave fancy himself a mighty chief, whose particular mission was to "take the town," but never one so whimsical as this which burst upon them without note or warning.

The swinging screens of green baize which stood just within the front door, were flung violently apart, and as he gave vent to that closing squeal of defiance, Barnacle Bildad Tholuck stood revealed to the eyes of the curious in the full glow of the lamplight.

And he formed a picture well worth looking at, too, for those who could appreciate physical beauty and power in a fellow-being.

A veritable giant in size, standing but little under seven feet in his boots of horse-hide, but so admirably proportioned and balanced in every way that this extreme height was apt to be overlooked or under-estimated unless a comparison was made with some other of known height.

As he entered the saloon he doffed his broad-brimmed hat and tossed the long hair back from his high, snow-white forehead; hair that might have done honor to a woman, fine and silken, curling naturally, of the purest corn-yellow hue. His beard was a shade or two lighter, worn full and so long that the ends were tucked under the beaded belt which encircled his round, compact waist.

The only drawback to an otherwise remarkably handsome face was to be found in his eyes. They were of a heavenly blue, remarkably brilliant, but so very large and protuberant as to constitute a positive deformity. From this peculiarity no doubt had arisen that appellation of "wall-eyed."

"Pin back yer eyelids an' take a good look at the showcus, gentlemen!" he cried, squaring himself before the amused and critical audience.

"The one greatest an' onliest king-pin o' fishes that navergetes the dry airth onto his two legs as easy an' nat'ral as he do the ragin' canawl with his double-gear'd fins an' screw-propeller! The only Wall-eyed Pike o' the Peak! The 'riginal Colorado Barnacle o' Fifty-nine! The fust galoot to clean up gold on Cherry Crick, an' the man who climbed the Peak an' pulled the Pike up after him—Bildad Tholuck, Esquire, gentlemen: let me make ye 'quainted!"

With a sweeping wave of his hat the stranger bowed low, then drew himself erect and gazed benignantly around upon the smiling audience. But for those unlucky wall-eyes he would have looked the perfect demigod.

Of all who listened only the dark-browed barkeeper seemed irritated rather than amused, and said, shortly:

"When fish o' your caliber comes into this hole, they either holds thar hush or else calls fer a squar' bait o' sech medicine as 'll do them the most good."

"An' mebbe you think I ain't got the sand to do it, or the rocks to settle the bill, o' alligator-gar?" laughed Barnacle Bill, lugging forth a heavy buckskin sack and tossing it up to the ceiling and catching it again as it descended. "Right thar's the purty boys as sais you missed your guess when you tuck me fer a dead-beat—fer a snappin' turkle as takes everythin' that comes in his way an' never gives or spends nothin' but a smell o' spilt musk!"

The surly bartender made a muttered apology, for he had mistaken the stranger for one of those annoying bummers whose sole mission on earth seems to be the "beating" of saloons, but Barnacle Bill minded neither it nor him.

"Swim up, ye big an' little fishes—the only 'riginal Wall-eyed Pike o' the Peak slings his invite to'rds ye. The best ye got, barkeep', an' take your pay out o' that," he cried, tossing the purse of gold upon the counter.

The invitation was promptly accepted, for that class of men who frequent an Arizona saloon accept drink as freely as they bestow it upon others.

It was yet early on the evening which witnessed the meeting of the six conspirators in the old mine, and the same which Jasper Quigley chose for his interview with Pet Flamsteed, but already the crack resort of the sporting class was well patronized, both at the bar and the gambling hall beyond.

"Make me a Arizony cock-tail," cried Barnacle Bill, as the barkeeper slung glasses along the long counter with a skill peculiar to the profession. "Pour in the peppermint an' kyann, but needn't mind the rotten aigs nur karrysene. The Wall-eyed Pike o' the Peak kin git away with 'most anything he tackles, but he draws a line at them vegetables!"

"New-comer in these parts, I reckon?" ventured Long John Wilkinson, the genteel card-sharp, who had mentally calculated the contents of the buckskin sack, and come to the conclusion that it was worth "going for."

"Reckon you're a Yankee, fer you ketched it fust cast," was the smiling response. "Not that I'm a tender-foot, for I was one o' the fust to sling pick an' wrastle with a shoveton Cherry Crick in '59, an' I've stuck to that line like a bullhead to a angle-worm ever sence. But this is the fust time I ever riz my back-fin an' wigged my tail in this camp."

"Prospecting, or have you made your pile—if that's a fair question?" added the gambler, nodding to the barkeeper to fill them up again.

"Prospectin'," was the short response; but then, as though altering his determination, Barnacle Bill added, his big eyes twinkling: "Yes, sir, I'm out on the prospect, but not fer dry-diggin's, nur wet-diggin's, nur yit a quartz mine. I've s'arved my time thar."

"Something in the pasteboard line?" suggested Long John, his countenance falling a little. "Short-cards or faro?"

"Neither one nur t'other. Don't know one keerd from another. Wouldn't recognize a straight flush ef I see it, an' 'd be dead sure to throw away a hand o' four aces, 'cause they didn't hev more spots onto them," was the candid response of the unsophisticated wanderer. "No; it's a bit o' caliker which I'm prospectin' fer—bit o' caliker with a woman done up into it."

"Wife run off with some other man?" hazarded the other.

"Jest the t'other way: I want some woman to run away with me! Don't keer much whether she's somebody's wife or not, jest so she's a woman. Fact is, the other day I stumbled onto a queer sort o' book—the Bible, it was called; don't know whether you all ever hearn tell o' it or not. Anyway, in thar it said that it was p'izen bad medicine fer a man to play it alone all his life. Fer the last year or two, I've knowed that thar was somethin' lackin', though I couldn't tell fer the life o' me jest what it was, ontel I read them words. I studied it over fer nigh a week, an' then girded up my lions an' struck out for this place, as somebody told me it was the chucked full o' purty women o' any other mining camp this side o' the range. Now what I want to know is, kin you fill the bill? Is thar any chance o' a critter o' my caliber ketchin' onto a neat little heifer in this burg to spend my ducats an' nuss the young-'uns?"

When Bildad Tholuck began, his audience seemed inclined to regard it all as a jest, but they were soon convinced that the giant was in sober earnest. If ever man longed for a wife, he was that very individual.

Long John Wilkinson could hardly keep his face straight, even with the remembrance of that well-filled buckskin sack, the contents of which he already looked upon as good as his

own property, but he was a bit of a wag, and just then fortune offered him a chance to exercise his wit.

In a hurried whisper he called attention to a closely veiled female figure at that moment entering the saloon.

"There's your chance now! Young and lovely as an angel! Spunk up to her; but you mustn't be mealy-mouthed. Pop the question plump and square-rooted, and she'll give you the same sort of an answer."

He had no time for more words, as the veiled figure made no stop in the saloon, but was passing at once to the gambling room beyond. But he had said enough. Whatever he may have been in war, Barnacle Bill seemed resolved not to be a laggard in love, for he leaped forward and plumped down on his knees directly in the path of the unknown.

"Don't be skeered, annigeliferous madam!" he cried, in his most winning tones, and really looking a gallant suitor, despite his protruding eyes. "Right down at your feet flaps the never-foretamed Wall-eyed Pike o' the Peak—"

The woman started back, flinging back her veil, revealing a face of rare beauty, lighted up by a pair of glorious eyes which now flashed with indignation.

"What does this mean? Are you drunk, or mad?"

Several of the men present started forward, but Long John Wilkinson also took a step forward, with a significant gesture, and none there cared to cross him, even to win a smile from the Belle of Nugget Camp—for the woman was none other than Dashing Della Delsarte.

As Barnacle Bill saw her face, a gasping cry parted his bearded lips, and his pop-eyes protruded worse than ever. In a word, he seemed fairly electrified by that vision of loveliness. Still he was not rendered incapable of speech.

"Drunk with love, an' unless you say you'll marry me this very night, I'll be mad—madder'n a wet hen—Waal, I be durned!"

In swift succession came two sharp concussions, caused by the little palms of Dashing Della coming in violent contact with his cheeks, and then she slipped past him, leaving him on his knees in the center of the floor, tears in his eyes, so stinging had been the blows.

A ripple of laughter ran around the room, as Barnacle Bill slowly arose, but sober silence followed his first words.

"A woman kin slap my face—she kin use me for a door-mat to wipe her shoes onto, an' you'll never hear me kick. But the man as laughs ag'in I kin an' will lick so p'izenbad he won't be fit bait fer mud-cats! It's Barnacle Bill that sings, gentlemen, an' when you see his back-fin a-risin' an' his tail a-stirrin' up a whirlpool, you want to hunt your holes or git ready fer business in a holy minnit!"

He spoke in a low, even tone that was far more impressive than the loudest threats or blustering, and even the most reckless desperado there cared little about putting the giant to the test. And even the redoubted gambler turned a shade paler as he softly moved a hand toward his revolver when the Wall-eyed Pike faced in that direction. But the expected explosion did not come.

"I don't know but what it was a sort o' job you put up on me that time, mate, but I'm ready to forgive ye 'long o' the knock-down ye give me to the glorious critter—gal, woman or angel—which air it, pard?"

"A woman, straight enough," was the response, a slight wink agitating the eyelid furthest from Barnacle Bill. "And one, too, that must have been struck by your peculiar style of beauty, or you'd never have got off as easy."

"Easy be durned!" ejaculated Barnacle Bill, gingerly fingering his still tingling ears. "She's got a slap o' the fist that's wuss then the kick o' a mule's foot!"

"Nothing more than a little love-tap, my boy—"

"Oh, I ain't a-cryin', so don't think it. Ef so be she sals the word, she kin git up her muskle that-a-way every day in the year. 'Fears like it'd jest be fun to be a choppin'-block fer that gorgeous heifer—an' you said she was jest a plain woman without any angel-trimmin's an' sech?"

Long John Wilkinson nodded, never cracking a smile.

"No lucky critter got that claim staked out an' recorded?"

"If so, he lays mighty low. No one here has ever heard of him. Not but that there are plenty of boys in these diggin's who'd be only too glad to say different, but the odds are too heavy for any one man to buck against."

Barnacle Bill flung out one hand with a proud gesture.

"Little minners kin keep cluss along the shore, but the Wall-eyed Pike o' the Peak never yit see the water deep enough to skeer him out, 'specially when he see sech a gelorious bait a-danglin' afore his nose—not much! Mebbe thar is a hook inside, with a strong line tied to it an' a pole big enough to send me a-floppin' out o' the drink to gloryamen! but all the same, I'm goin' to take a bite, jest fer luck!"

At that moment a tall, dark man thrust his head and shoulders inside the door, making a

swift gesture that caught the eye of Long John, then drew back again. For a moment the gambler hesitated, for he was exceedingly loth to abandon his purpose of sampling the contents of Barnacle Bill's purse, but for some reason he was compelled to respond to the summons without delay.

"Wait here until I come back, and I'll tell you all you care to know about that lady," he said in a hurried whisper. "Fight shy of the boys here if they begin to talk cards, unless you can finger them for all that's out. I'll not be gone long," and he hastened away to answer the call.

Barnacle Bill was steering 'toward the dark woollen curtain which separated the saloon from the gambling hall, when a tall, stoop-shouldered individual in black clothes of clerical cut, but decidedly the worse for wear, sidled up to him with a deprecating bow and sickly smile.

"Humbly beggin' pardon fer introodin' onto a gent, but you 'peared a good deal struck with that lady, an' ef I do say so myself, thar ain't another man livin' as kin tell you more about her then this werry indiwidoal—excoose my card," and with another low bow, he extended a dirty bit of pasteboard on which was rudely printed with a pen, "The Rev. Pericles Parbuckle, D. D."

Barnacle Bill read the legend, then summed the fellow up at one keen, comprehensive glance.

"The name's all right, stranger, but them two last letters—reckon they mean Dead Duck, or Dirty Dog, don't they?"

"Have your little joke," said the bumper, with a nervous laugh, rubbing his grimy hands as though he enjoyed it hugely. "I'm a kinder down on my luck now, but it didn't always was—"

"I know all about that. You slung out a hint 'bout that trim young heifer. Kin you tell me who an' what she is?"

The Reverend Pericles Parbuckle cast a sly glance around the saloon, and seeing that they were being curiously watched, he nodded toward the other room, whispering huskily:

"We kin talk better in thar," leading the way past the curtain. "Does I know her? Well, I should whisper! We was raised together—or next door neighbors, anyway—"

He ceased speaking, for he saw that Barnacle Bill was not attending to him, but was standing in open-eyed amazement with his gaze fixed on the dealer at one of the faro tables. He could scarce believe the evidence of his eyes, yet there was no mistake.

The hat with its disguising veil, and the long, muffling cloak was gone, revealing a rich yet tasty toilet, but the pure blonde face with its glorious blue eyes was the same of which he had caught a glimpse in the saloon beyond.

She was seated at the faro table, with its painted lay-out, her jeweled fingers daintily toying with the silver box containing the freshly-shuffled cards, placidly waiting for the double rank of players to place their different colored chips on the cards of their choice for the deal which was just about to commence.

It was a sight such as only the wild West with its still wilder class of people could produce. A young and lovely woman—seemingly fit to be an ornament to society or the idol of a quiet household—acting as caterer to a lot of half-drunken roughs, dealing faro for cut-throats and professional black-legs!

"Thar you see her, boss," said the bumper, in his husky whisper, from close to Barnacle Bill's elbow. "Dashing Dell, as the sports call her; the trimmest little clipper that ever flipped the papers, but a tearer from the word git-up-an'-git!"

The giant turned upon him sharply, almost fiercely, and there was a threatening light in his big blue eyes as he said:

"None o' your dirty hints about that angel in petticoats, unless you want me to wring your neck like a spring chicken!"

Parbuckle dodged as though anticipating a blow, hastily uttering:

"Lord bless ye, I ain't quite sech a fool. Ef a body was to even look crossways at Dashing Dell, the boys would chaw him into monkey-feed afore he could git the kinks out o' his eyes. No, sir! not fer Joseph!"

"Does she deal here every night, or is it only a sort o' freak fer this once?"

"Reg'lar as the night comes, thar she is, business clean through. The Oasis wouldn't be a Oasis, but a p'izen desert without Dashing Dell. The boys would pine away an' wither like a lightnin'-struck sunflower ef a night was to come an' go without the little beauty thar to rake in thar shekels."

"You say she ain't married?"

"Ef I said so I forgot it, but it's true, all the same. To a man up a tree, it looks as though sech a persition as chief-cook-an'-bottle-washer to sech a captain as she, would be jest a little heaven all to itself; but things ain't always what they look. Now I ain't nigh as rich as you mought think, jest to look at my git-up, but thar ain't money enough in all Arizony to hire me fer to take that persish—a cast-iron man couldn't hold it longer then fer the boys

to git wind of the 'rangement; then thar'd be a funeral, sure!"

If he thought to bluff the Wall-eyed Pike off, he underrated his man, for Barnacle Bill waited to hear no more than that his new-found divinity was still "in the market," when he made his way to the faro table, and pressing to the front rank, dropped his heavy purse of gold upon the table.

"Back-fin up an' tail a-wigglin'! Cl'ar the riffles, all ye little minners, an' give Barnacle Bildad Tholuck room to spread hisself! Heaps o' ducats here, an' dead loads more whar that come from! Don't git skeered, annigeliferous madam—I'll play light when luck goes ag'inst ye; Billy-boy ain't no hog!"

Dashing Dell vouchsafed the speaker a single glance as she deftly rippled the cards and replaced them in the box, but not the slightest alteration came over her face to show that she recognized the ardent suitor of the saloon.

"Make your game, fortune awaits you, gentlemen!"

Despite the love-fever which burned so ardently in his veins, Barnacle Bill played a steady game and gave evidence of a thorough knowledge of the rules, still fortune seemed to have an especial spite against him, for without an exception, the cards ran against him, and his plethoric sack speedily grew thin as his gold flowed into the bank.

Far more uneasy than the luckless gambler, who seemed to be fully repaid for his losses by the sight of the beautiful dealer, Pericles Parbuckle fidgeted and fumed, his fingers itching for some of the gold which the other was getting rid of so fast, but the Wall-eyed Pike o' the Peak turned a deaf ear to his whispered advice, and played his own way.

As his last stake was swept away, Barnacle Bill drew a long breath, his protruding eyes fixed on the immobile face of the blonde siren opposite, but apparently she had eyes for naught save her dealing.

"A clean thousan' gone, and nothin' to show fer it!" almost howled Pericles Parbuckle, hopping from one foot to the other like a turkey dancing on hot plates. "Why didn't you pay 'tention to what I said? You'd 'a' busted the bank, sure!"

"An' so ruined this annigeliferous madam!" indignantly retorted the gallant Barnacle, with a languishing leer at the face of Dashing Dell. "No, sir! Bring a tear into them eyes! Be sech a bloody o' gar as that? When he does sech a dirty trick, you kin call the great an' only Wall-eyed Pike o' the Peak a cross atween a mud-cat an' a tappin' snorkle! Fer jest one sweet smile from them rosy-red lips, or a little 'preciatin' look from them angel-eyes, I'd coin every scale on my carcass into golden eagles an' pour them into her lap!"

Eagerly Barnacle Bill watched the effect of this hyperbolic speech, but placidly as ever Dashing Della dealt on, not a muscle of her beautiful face changing, not a sign to show that she heard or understood his words.

With a sigh that seemed to come from the very bottom of his stomach, Barnacle Bill yielded his place to another player, but still hung around the table, unable to tear himself away from his lode-star.

The passion which filled his bosom, however, was too great for him to smother altogether, and ere long he broke forth:

"The world's holler, and my doll's stuffed with sawdust! When a man hain't got no more money, an' the angel what he is jest dead-gone onto, what's the wuth o' livin' an' wastin' good air? Not a durned bit. Ef I should go out an' make a hole in the drink with my carcass, who is they as would heave a sigh or drop a tear 'cause the only great Wall-eyed Pike o' the Peak—the 'riginal Barnacle o' Colorado—hed petered out? Not one! An' durned ef I wouldn't do it, too, ef the water wasn't so p'izen wet that it'd bring back my rheumatics!"

"What's the matter, mate?" asked a rough voice, as a man dressed in mining costume entered the room and advanced toward the table. "What's gone wrong with you?"

"Dead broke, an' my sweetness hes soured on me!" was the lugubrious reply, pointed by a reproachful look toward Dashing Della, and Barnacle Bill sighed like a furnace.

"You don't mean that critter?" and the shaggy eyebrows were uplifted, while the bristling mustaches curled sneeringly as the fellow followed the giant's glance. "Then you're a pesky fool for your trouble! Go an' slit some feller's wizen, take his dust an' toss it in her lap. Be sure she'll cuddle down to ye ag'in as long as your money lasts."

"Do you mean me, sir?" demanded Dashing Della.

"You or any other brazen, painted—"

A sharp report cut the foul speech short, and as he fell across the table, a red cross showed upon his shoulder.

CHAPTER VIII.

REVOLVER ROBINSON FIGHTS THE TIGER.
For one instant those who had caught the sharp question and answer which passed between Dashing Della and the dark-browed miner, believed that the former had avenged herself by

firing the shot which cut short the string of brutal epithets, but this belief was quickly dispelled.

Her arms still rested on the edge of the table, her white hands clasping the polished silver box just as they had been when she first noticed the insolent speaker.

For an instant thus, then she raised a fine cambric handkerchief and with one corner daintily wiped from the filmy lace which filled the bosom of her low-cut dress-front a drop of mingled blood and brains which had fallen there from the bullet-shattered skull of the dead man.

Then her soft blue eyes were raised and her pearly teeth barely revealed themselves in a gracious smile, as she bowed her head and said:

"A thousand thanks, sir, for your kindness in taking a disagreeable duty off my hands."

"No thanks are necessary, my dear lady," quickly returned a deep, manly voice from near the hanging curtain. "I am only sorry that I had not come sooner, to spare your ears the vile speech of that dirty scoundrel."

All eyes were turned in that direction, and more than one bronzed face grew pale, while the crowd instinctively parted and shrunk to either side as the new-comer was recognized.

"Ay!" he added, his voice sharp and cutting. "Sorry for that, and ashamed to see that among all who bear the shape of mankind here, there was not one to choke off that filthy-mouthed hound! Come! has that dead dog any friend or relative in this room? If so, let him or they remove the carcass, or else I'll cause it to be cast out for the buzzards!"

Erect and defiant he stood, still clasping the revolver, from which had sped the death-shot, in his right hand, his eagle-eye roving swiftly around the room, ready and even eager for some one to take up the cause of the dead man.

But a trifle, if any, above the medium height of man, the champion of beauty nevertheless presented a model of manly strength and symmetry.

In his neat, closely fitting suit of black broad-cloth and snowy-white linen, it could be seen that he possessed a frame of perfect mold, with thews of steel and sinews of finely tempered brass. The masses of muscle that rounded out his form to the perfect contour of manly beauty, though not so palpable to sight, were to the touch like layers of hard metal, the seat of a strength almost beyond belief, and certainly far beyond the comprehension of such as had never witnessed its exhibition.

His complexion was dark, but of remarkable clearness. His hair, worn close-cut, was jetty-black, lustrous as the plumage of the raven, while a long, drooping pair of mustaches shaded his firm-cut mouth with its red lips.

But the feature of his face which attracted the attention first and most forcibly was to be found in the eyes, so large and piercing, so full of fire and power, that few indeed were they who could meet their gaze, even in friendly interchange—but when aglow with a deadly rage, as now, they were more terrible than the gleaming orbs of an enraged rattlesnake.

A low murmur ran through the crowd, and then the mystery was solved. That daring man was Revolver Robinson, the Red-Handed, the most reckless desperado of modern days.

A low, mocking laugh parted his lips as he glanced around the room and noted the almost universal consternation which prevailed. It was a sweet tribute to his prowess!

"Not one to speak a word for the dead dog? Not a friend or partner in all this crowd?" he asked, slowly.

For another brief space there was silence, then one man stepped to the side of the slain, resting a hand upon the shoulder which bore the red cross, and faced the desperado.

Swift as thought the revolver rose, but the man flung up one empty hand, and Revolver Rob as quickly lowered his weapon, undischarged.

"Tain't fightin' I want now," said the man, in a husky tone, "but I never went back onto a livin' mate, nor I won't do it on a dead one."

"He is your friend, then?"

"He was, when livin', an' he's still more, now he's dead."

"Yet you don't seem inclined to take up his quarrel?"

"Not jest now, funder then to say that it was a dirty trick not to give him the ghost of a show—to shoot him down from abind his back, without word or warnin'!"

Those who heard this bold speech held their breath in expectation of a coming tragedy, the more especially as they could see the black brows of the desperado contracting, and the dangerous light deepening in his eyes.

Even the speaker turned a shade paler, and the look in his bloodshot eyes seemed that of a cornered wolf, but for all that he never flinched, his hand still on the shoulder of his dead friend as he confronted Revolver Rob.

Though seen by but few in the crowd, there was a swift motion of Dashing Della's white hand, and like magic the face of the desperado changed to a more peaceful expression.

"You talk bold enough, my dear sir," he said, his voice sweet and mellow, a pleasant

smile curving his red lips. "It would be a pity to kill one who dares to defend even a dead mate. Surely I have seen your face before. May I ask your name?"

For a moment the fellow hesitated, but then replied:

"Sandy Lithgow, my friends call me."

"And you deserve an army of them, too! But let us hope that they are not all of them of the same stripe as that cowardly cur whom I was forced to punish."

"No livin' man ever dared to call him that!" sullenly muttered Lithgow.

"Which is the same as to say that I can talk bolder of the dead than the living?" laughed Revolver Rob, but with little of mirth in his tones. "My dear sir, take a bit of friendly advice. Keep a silent tongue in your head while it is in the lion's mouth, and your days in this good land of ours will be greatly lengthened."

"Since you claim that carrion, remove it and dispose of it according to your own sweet will. If you think he is worth the trouble of seeking revenge for his death, you know to whom to apply. I am not hard to find, by those who seek me on business of importance."

"I'll bear it in mind, an' mebbe the time 'll come when I kin make the call," said the fellow, with a sickly smile, but with the hatred of a fiend glittering in his sunken eyes.

Drawing his gaunt figure erect, Sandy Lithgow allowed his gaze to slowly wander over the faces of those gathered in the hall, and then, with a sudden lighting up of his rugged face, he raised his right hand and made several swift motions.

As if in obedience to these signals, three men moved toward him and assisted him in raising the corpse and bearing it away.

The red lips of the desperado suddenly grew together so firmly that they turned white, as the blood was forced from them, for upon the shoulder of each of the four men was a red cross, in the same spot, and precisely the same in appearance as that with which the dead man was marked!

Already the Languo of Six was broken, and by the very man to compass whose ruin and death it had been formed!

Was it the work of a capricious fate, or was there a deep purpose beneath the seeming chance which led to the removal of one of Revolver Robinson's sworn foes?

With the taking away of the corpse, the chill which had rested over the congregation seemed to pass away, and Revolver Rob took a seat at the faro table presided over by Dashing Della, a pleasant smile upon his handsome face, looking more the polished courtier than the desperado, whose wild and reckless deeds had gained for him the sub-title of Red-Handed.

"Call on Madam Fortune to smile her sweetest upon you, Miss Delsarte," he said laughingly, "for I am going to fight the tiger for all I am worth, and you will make a fortune or the bank will owe me one ere the stroke of midnight summons you away!"

The fair dealer smiled sweetly—so sweetly that the Wall-eyed Pike o' the Peak heaved a mighty sigh of mingled despair and disgust and rushed away to the saloon in quest of liquid consolation, with the Reverend Pericles Parbuckle sticking to him as closely as a leech—and said:

"There is no limit; may fortune favor the deserving! The deal begins anew, so make your game, gentlemen!"

To all appearance, Revolver Robinson was as cool in play as he was in war, and stacking a goodly pile of mingled gold and notes on the table before him, selected his favorite cards and backed them freely, disdaining the use of chips.

Meanwhile the Wall-eyed Pike o' the Peak was swallowing a mighty dose of tanglefoot in the saloon, in company with the few who still remained there. His order was promptly honored by the barkeeper, on the strength of the gold he had exhibited so recently, but when the drinks were disposed of, Barnacle Bill made no movement to liquidate in the all-important sense of the word as the waiter understood it, but leaned with his back against the counter, and sighed heavily.

"You see a melancholly wreck afore ye, gents! The great an' only 'riginal Wall-eyed Pike o' the Peak gives in fer good an' all! No more'll he rise his back-tin an' chase the little minners fer a squar' meal! Never ag'in 'll he wiggle his double-gear'd tail ontel the waters life up in a mighty maelstrom o' death an' annihilation! The glory o' his shinin' scales bes bin forever rubbed out, an' he's lost the power o' his front teeth fer keeps! The low-down sucker kin cock its hat in his face, an' the festive crawfish nibble at his tail, without fear o' bein' sucked in to gloryamen!"

"An' all this along of a female heifer whic don't know a good thing when she sees it!"

"Ef you'd only 'a' tuck my advice!" groaned Pericles Parbuckle. "But you wouldn't! You hed eyes only fer the dealer, an' more'n once you played both ends to lose—"

"Durn the dust! Who's thinkin' o' that?" and the giant turned fiercely upon the grumbling bummer, grasping him by one shoulder and

raising him clear off the ground, giving him a contemptuous shake before flinging him half-way across the room. "Durn an' double-durn the money! I'd give it all ten times over fer jest the sweet smile which that angeliferous madam throwed away onto that kid-glove sport—an' he a-suckin' of it in as though it come to him by good rights—the owdacious, varnished-up alligator-gar!"

"You was a leetle too slow, stranger," laughed one of the others. "Ef you'd taken the chance when Paul Chapricneer offered it, that smile would 'a' fell to your share, 'stead o' to Revolver Rob."

"An' wouldn't I 'a' done it, too! only that cuss pulled trigger afore the words was fairly out o' the critter's fish-trap? What show was they fer anybody else?"

"It's a way the boss hes," said another, with an ugly laugh. "He shoots whar any other feller 'd be thinkin' about drawin', an' tha's what give him the name he now w'ars."

"Mebbe he won't w'ar it much longer," said Barnacle Bill, with an ominous shake of his lion-like head. "When ary other fish flaps its tail in old Wall-eye's face, the scales is bound to fly right smart—you hear me!"

"'Twon't be a hard job to git all the fun o' that sort ye want, ef ye was big as a mount'in!" retorted the fellow, with a malicious sneer on his hard features.

"At your shop, mebbe?" and as he uttered the words, Barnacle Bill took a half-step forward, his pop-eyes aglow.

But the other retreated, hastily crying, with a sickly smile on his ugly features:

"No—from a mighty sight better man then I lay claim to bein'. Bless ye, stranger, do I look like a man to tackle a double-gear'd mount'in like you be?"

Barnacle Bill surveyed him from head to foot and back again, with a deliberate stare, his huge mustaches curling.

"Come to look ag'in, don't reckon ye be. Ef I was a glass o' whisky, now, then I mought look out fer snags. An' that makes me think; set 'em up ag'in barkeep'!"

That worthy held his hand over the counter, wriggling his fingers significantly.

"The slate was bu'sted when we cleaned house the last time, mate. An' I hain't got a mem'ry no longer'n your thumb."

The Wall-eyed Pike stared at the speaker for a moment as though at some monstrous curiosity, then reared back with his thumbs stuck under his arm-pits, his long fingers beating the devil's tattoo on his broad chest, and his elbows akimbo.

"Kin I believe my two ears? The p'izenly owdacious cuss actilly refuses to hang me up—an' I jest out more then a round thousan' good dollars on the blessed game in yender! Gents an' feller-citizens, did ye ever hear the like?"

A general laugh ran around the room, more at the ridiculous demeanor of the Wall-eyed Pike o' the Peak, and the hot anger of the barkeeper, than aught in the words, but it served to send the ugly temper of the fellow up to boiling pitch.

In a voice husky with rage, he cried:

"That's enough o' your lip! You've beat me out of a round dozen drinks, but you don't do it no more. An' the quicker you peel out o' this ranch, the longer you'll keep a bull hide onto your back!"

Barnacle Bill turned to the men who had just drank at his expense, and said, in a shame-faced tone:

"Gents, I dropped a cool thousan' on the game in yender, this evenin'. Lend me ten dollars to satisfy this onmannerly shark, an' to take a good-night swaller—what, not one o' yer?" and his tones grew still more lugubrious as no one seemed inclined to grant his modest request, while more than one of those who had been most forward in walking up to the bar at his invitation, slunk away out of doors or into the other room.

"You can't take them in as you did me," and the scowling bartender began to rub up a revolver and to try its lock after a significant fashion. "Come—s'pose you take a little walk! It'll be a heap healthier fer you in the end."

"Then you won't give me a drink—jest a mouthful to keep off the snakes!"

"Not a drop—unless you take it through this funnel!" and as the fellow spoke, he cocked and leveled the revolver full at the breast of the giant.

Just how it was accomplished, not one unless it may have been the Wall-eyed Pike himself, could have explained, but an instant later the undischarged revolver was wrested from the grasp of the bartender, while the left thumb and finger of the giant was twisting his long nose all out of shape.

"Shoot old Wall-eye, will ye? Pull a gun onto a leetle suckin' baby like me, eh? Won't give the old man jest one swaller o' p'izen fer to drive away the snakes? An' the rest o' you no-count suckers ain't got no more use fer a feller when his ducats is all gone, hev ye? Bah!" and with a final twist of the barkeeper's nose that brought both blood and tears, he released him, then swiftly extracted the cartridges from the pistol, tucking the weapon back on the counter.

"Jest as I said, I dropped a thousan' dollars on the game in yender—every grain I hed in the old sack, fer you don't ketch old Wall-eye in no lie, ef he knows hisself—an' I tuck a notion to see what sort o' sand thar was in you fellers' craw; which I found out in a hurry, too! You didn't wait to feel in the old man's other pocket fer another weasel-skin, did yer?" and with a mocking laugh the giant lugged out another heavy sack and emptied a golden shower upon the bar.

"Take your pay out o' that, you sullen-eyed, red-nosed dog-fish, an' take a dose of it to cure your nose-ache, ef you can stomach the medicine. An' 'long with the rest, take this bit o' good advice: don't try to bounce another man afore you know jest what kind o' sand he's got in his craw, or you mought come off with a wuss loss then a few drops of nosebleed. An' as fer the rest o' you sweet-scented mud-cats, when you want another drink, jest call on old Wall-eye, an' he'll shake ye up a genuine Arizony cocktail, an' make ye settle it with a simon-pure clog-dance—understand?"

Mockingly his great blue eyes ran over the group of more or less embarrassed fellows whom he had so adroitly weighed and found wanting, but not one among them had an answer ready, and turning on his heel, the Wall-eyed Pike o' the Peak left the saloon, once more entering the gaming hall.

Now, as when he left the room, Revolver Robinson was the center of attraction, the table at which he was "fighting the tiger" being closely surrounded by an eager and attentive crowd, yet with a clear space left behind and on either side after a manner which spoke louder than words.

Little fear that the noted desperado would lack "elbow-room" where he was so well known.

To all appearance he was bent on making good his laughing threat to Dashing Della, for he was betting heavily and with remarkably good judgment. The pile of gold before him was steadily increasing, and though an occasional wager was raked over the board, this but afforded breathingspaces for those less daring gamblers who longed to join in and follow his lead to fortune but dare not.

It was significant evidence of the sinister reputation gained by Revolver Robinson that even those who were most deeply interested in the game when he entered it, without exception, drew out as soon as the bets which they had already placed were decided in their favor or against them. They seemed afraid to follow his lead, and still more afraid to act upon their own judgment, or even to occupy space on cards with their bets which he might wish to lack.

Understanding this, and knowing the noted desperado as well as they did, a low mutter of surprise went around the circle as a stranger pressed his way through their ranks and took up a station close to the left of Revolver Robinson, producing a goodly quantity of golden coins and boldly placing his bets.

At this brisk not to say rude, intrusion, Revolver Rob glanced around with a slight uplifting of his dark eyebrows, scanning the stranger from head to foot with one swift glance and what he saw may be briefly summed up.

He saw a slender, trim-built form in full Mexican garb, richly ornamented with gold and silver lace, bearing a belt full of finely engraved weapons. But little of his face was visible, thanks to the broad-brimmed sombrero which was worn low over his forehead, and the full beard which covered his cheeks, chin and mouth. Not even his hands furnished a clue by which he might be recognized, for they were incased in closely-fitting gauntlets.

Contrary to the general expectation, Revolver Robinson made no remark as he averted his gaze. Indeed, he seemed to be in an unusually gentle mood for him, and from the frequent glances which he cast upon the placid countenance of the fair dealer opposite, together with their nature, the reason was not very difficult to surmise.

Mars had surrendered to Venus—Revolver Robinson was over head and ears in love with Dashing Della.

Among those who saw this the most clearly, was the redoubtable Wall-eyed Pike o' the Peak, who fairly snorted forth his indignation at this "varnished-up gar-fish," who had the audacity to be casting "sheep's-eyes at his sweetness," and in his wrath he might have made a rash move, had he not been once more anticipated.

The excitement around the table, none the less intense from its being suppressed, was steadily increasing as the lookers-on saw that there was more than a simple desire to play actuating the stranger who was dividing the honors with Revolver Rob in brisk and daring betting.

True, the latter took the lead in placing his bets, as well as in the magnitude of his wagers, but as often as he played a card to win, the stranger at once backed it to lose, and vice versa.

Once or twice this might have happened,

without any especial significance being attached to it or comment being made, but not so time after time, deal following deal, as really was the case now. That could only be the result of deliberate design, and a more deadly insult cannot be offered to a professional gambler. Nothing if not superstitious, in their unwritten code this means a deliberate attempt to "hoodoo" the one thus treated: in other words to cast an evil spell over him and his.

Dashing Della was one of the first to notice this fact, and for the first time since the foul insult which had been offered her by Paul Chaparroneer and wiped out in blood by Revolver Robinson, the soft flush died out from her cheeks and an anxious look came into the deep blue eyes.

She stole a quick glance at the face of the handsome desperado from beneath her long eyelashes, and though she saw that Revolver Rob had not as yet taken notice of the fact, a subtle instinct told her that there was serious trouble brewing which boded evil to her secret plans.

Unconsciously she precipitated the catastrophe, for Revolver Robinson was too deeply in love to miss a single change of his idol's countenance, and so the anxious look which Dashing Della cast upon the Mexican set him to thinking, and it was not long before he saw what was in the wind.

Fully conscious of his own prowess, and knowing how wide-spread was his dangerous reputation, Revolver Robinson could not at first bring himself to believe that this marked opposition was anything more than an accidental occurrence. To settle all doubt, however, he at once made a radical change in his former line of play.

Scarcely had he done so, when the Mexican shifted his bets to correspond, still going in direct antagonism to the line marked out by his rival, and with his last doubt dissipated, Revolver Robinson, an angry flush coming into his face, half-turned toward the audacious player—but the hot words which rose to his lips were checked by an appealing look and hasty signal from Dashing Della.

Unfortunately other eyes than his saw the signal, and with a venomous light in his eyes the Mexican cried:

"Foul play! This man is in collusion with yonder painted wanton, and she is guiding his play by secret signals!"

CHAPTER IX.

THE CHAMPION OF THE FAIR SEX.

BEFORE the charge had fairly left his lips, the hand of Revolver Robinson fell upon his shoulder, those slender white fingers closing until they seemed to fairly meet in the flesh. He felt the Mexican cringe and shiver beneath his grasp, and there was a trace of contempt mingling with the stern anger of his tone as he said:

"You are insolent, sir! Down on your knees and apologize to this lady, or—"

With a snarling, choking cry, the Mexican drew a long dagger from his bosom, and made a swift stroke full at the heart of the desperado, but Revolver Robinson was not one to be easily taken unawares, and with a single sweep of his left arm the glittering blade was dashed aside, and then his right hand, swift as light and heavy as the stroke of a smith's hammer, shot out and knocked the would-be assassin headlong from his chair and half-way across the room.

A cry of mingled wonder and horror burst from the scattering spectators, for at first glance it seemed as though that lightning blow had shattered the head of the Mexican into several parts, but almost as quickly they realized their mistake. His hat flew there, his false wig and beard also separated from his head and each other, leaving his face bare and smooth as that of a woman.

Revolver Robinson had leaped to his feet as though to follow up the attack, but as his eyes fell upon that fair face, no longer hidden and disguised, he turned pale as death, while a look of horror quenched the angry glitter in his eyes.

"My God!" broke gaspingly from his lips, as he shrunk back. "Isolina Planillas—you here—and thus!"

It was true. The pretended Mexican ranchero was a woman. A woman, too, whom Revolver Robinson appeared to know well, were one to judge from that horrified look and exclamation.

Beyond all doubt there was a mystery here, and more than ever feeling that there was risk in mixing up in the matter, the spectators fell still further away, leaving only the desperado and Dashing Della near the fallen woman.

As those startled words left the lips of Revolver Rob, revealing the sex of the being whom his heavy hand had just stricken down, Dashing Della, with only the least perceptible hesitation, arose and swiftly made her way to the side of the quivering form, kneeling on the floor and raising the bleeding head to her lap.

As she wiped away the crimson stain with her handkerchief, Revolver Rob uttered in a husky voice:

"As Heaven is my judge, I knew not that she

was other than she seemed. You saw her disguise—it was perfect—so perfect that I could have sworn she was a man—"

While he was speaking, Dashing Della was closely examining the luckless woman, and in a tone of great relief she now lifted her eyes and said:

"There is no great damage done—she is not seriously injured, and a little rest will fully restore her—"

Even as the words left her lips, the strange woman opened her eyes, and recognizing who it was whose arms were supporting her, a gasping cry of unspeakable hatred broke from her lips, and with an energy lent by that hatred, she dashed her clinched hand into the fair face, tore herself free and staggered to her feet.

Her face was that of a beautiful fiend—rarely beautiful despite the discolored spot on her cheek where the fist of Revolver Robinson had fallen, not squarely, thanks to her womanly flinching when she saw that a blow was inevitable, else she would almost surely have been killed, as the desperado feared when he discovered for the first time that he was dealing with a woman, not a man as he supposed—despite the venomous hatred with which her blazing black eyes were filled, despite the blood-tinged froth which discolored her lips.

As she moved, one foot struck against the dagger which had been knocked from her hand by the swift parry of Revolver Rob, and stooping she snatched it up, then leaped back to where Dashing Della stood, the glittering weapon raised high above her head, threatening the fair gambler with instant death.

A gasping cry of horror broke from the pale lips of the unnerved desperado, but ere he could make a move to guard the woman whom he loved far better than his own life, Dashing Della gave proof that she was quite capable of taking care of herself.

Even as the gleaming weapon was descending, she caught the wrist of the Spanish woman, and without seeming effort on her part, Dashing Della held the armed hand motionless, despite the frantic efforts of the raving creature.

"Devil—beautiful fiend!" she screamed, her face convulsed with fury, the great eyes almost bursting from their sockets as she struggled in vain to free her hand, "I will kill you! I will drain your false heart of its last drop of blood in payment for trampling mine in the mire—"

She choked, and her strength seemed to fail her all at once. Dashing Della released her wrist, but stepped back a pace, still on guard.

But the precaution appeared to be needless, for the half-distracted woman paid no further attention to her, turning instead upon Revolver Robinson.

"False, perjured traitor—lying dog!" she cried, her powers returning as if by magic, the quivering dagger emphasizing her bitter words, "you won and wore me, then cast me aside as a worthless thing for which you had no further use. I suspected that such was your secret intention, and I gave you solemn warning that if such ever came to pass I would follow and find you even though you fled to the end of the world. You lulled my doubts then by soft words and ardent kisses, even while you were planning my betrayal. You robbed me and fled—hid your identity under another name, and sought out fresh victims; but I did not forget my vow, and at last I have found you—villainous traitor, take your reward!"

Up rose the glittering weapon in the hand of the beautiful fury, hanging over the broad bosom of the desperado, but never a muscle quivered, never the slightest shade of fear crept over his white, hard-set face, while his dark and lustrous eyes calmly met her fiery glare.

For one moment his life hung trembling in the balance, and the agitated spectators fairly held their breath as they looked for the gleaming weapon to descend in search of the heart of Revolver Robinson.

"Strike, Isolina—strike home and keep your vow!"

Soft and mellow sounded the words, with not a trace of fear or even emotion in them; but their effect was far more sure and sudden than would have been the meekest pleading or angriest denunciation.

For a brief space she hesitated, then with a wild, despairing cry she flung the dagger over her shoulder, its keen point sinking deep into the further wall.

"Devil—cunning demon! Why do you not defend yourself—why not rage and curse at me instead of disarming me by this cunning assumption of meekness which is as foreign to your real nature as it is to that of a hungry wolf? But with all your cunning you shall not escape me in the end! I will sacredly keep my oath—but not now! I will first rend and trample on your heart as you crushed mine beneath your feet!"

Swiftly she turned and confronted Dashing Della.

"First you, then him! Think not that I am blind. Not a glance, not a sign crossed that table but what I noted it and read its meaning. He fancies himself in love with you, while you

are exerting all your witchery to rivet his chains the more surely. Through you I will strike my first blow at his heart. I swear to never know rest or quietness until I have bunted you down to death and degradation. Not but that your heart would bleed bitterly enough without my aid—false to one, false to all, and in the end that faithless villain would desert you as surely as the moon is shining over our heads this night, and it is not from motives of mercy or compassion that I take this oath to save you from that pang. But it was on your behalf that the craven cur struck me, and only your heart's blood can wipe out that degradation!"

She ceased speaking from sheer exhaustion, not that the vials of her tempestuous wrath had fairly emptied themselves.

For the first time she seemed to notice the eagerly listening crowd around them, and a hot flush of shame mantled her cheeks. Without another word she turned and fled from the gambling hall.

This abrupt termination to the scene took the spectators entirely by surprise, and though thus far Revolver Robinson had acted with wonderful gentleness, they knew how foreign it was to his fiery temper, and began to dread his seeking revenge on them for having dared to listen while he was receiving such an unmerciful tongue-lashing.

Had they been given time to do so, they would have beaten a hasty retreat before the beautiful fury took her departure, but she fled so suddenly that this was impossible, and they were left trembling in their boots lest his pent-up wrath should discharge itself on their devoted heads.

But there came a sudden reprieve for the

"The two-legged critter as lifts his hand ag'inst a woman save to chuck her under the chin an' call her his dear little chub or shiner, ain't fit to chaw bread fer sick monkeys!"

Clear and distinct came these words, uttered with a deliberation that could not be mistaken. Beyond a doubt they were intended for Revolver Robinson, and uttered as a challenge to the noted desperado.

That worthy likewise understood as much, and turning from Dashing Della, to whom he was just on the point of speaking, he whipped forth a revolver and half-raised it to a level as he saw the crowd scattering to either side, leaving the redoubtable Wall-eyed Pike o' the Peak standing alone, plainly the author of that biting speech.

All through that evening Revolver Robinson had acted strangely unlike his wonted self, nor was the exception noted now. With him it was shot and then ask the needed questions afterward, but though he was morally certain that the giant had uttered that criticism, he held his fire.

Of all present, the Wall-eyed Pike o' the Peak alone did not seem to realize the full extent of the danger he was incurring, for he stood easily there, his hands empty, making no offer to draw a weapon. Though bold enough, his wits seemed too slow to take the initiative.

"Did you utter those words, sir?" sharply demanded Revolver Rob, his dark eyes aglow with suppressed passion.

"Did I? Well I should snicker to laugh—"

Swift as thought the pistol of the desperado rose until the shining drop on the muzzle fairly covered the brain of the giant; but still Barnacle Bill did not flinch or move a hand toward a weapon.

"Pull trigger ef you're coward enough to shoot down a man with empty hands!" he cried, undauntedly. "What I said was no more than the truth. A man as would strike a—"

"Stop!" thundered Revolver Robinson, his face dark as a thunder-cloud, while the angry flashing of his eyes would have served admirably for the accompanying lightning. "Repeat those words, and I'll scatter what little brains you have, all over the room!"

It seemed as though he would put the threat into execution anyhow, but Dashing Della glided rapidly to his side and rested one fair hand upon his pistol arm.

"Spare him if possible—for my sake!"

No other ears heard her words, but all could see the result. The pistol was lowered, and the ugly frown faded from the face of the desperado like hoar-frost before the genial breath of the morning sun.

"You are a fool, stranger, but for all that, you are too brave a man to send out of the world all unprepared. I don't often take the trouble to explain my actions to any man, but as you seem troubled by what has occurred, I don't mind telling you that when I struck that woman to save my own life, I had not the slightest idea that she was other than what she seemed—a man like myself."

Surely this was enough to satisfy any reasonable being, but just then the Wall-eyed Pike o' the Peak was deaf to all reason. He saw that only the hasty whisper of Dashing Della had saved his life, and instead of being grateful for that favor, his big heart swelled with rage at the evidence of confidence and under-

"Don't make a diff o' bitterance!" he said, doggedly. "A lick is a lick an' a woman is a woman! An' him as chugs sich, as I said afore, can't swim in the same hole with the only great an' 'riginal Wall-eyed Pike o' the Pike—which is me, individooally an' collectively, amen!"

The eyes of Revolver Rob kindled afresh at the obstinacy of the giant, and the remarkable influence which Dashing Della had gained over a man of his passionate nature, may be guessed at by the fact that without replying to this repeated challenge, he turned and cast an appealing look into her face. Plainer than mere words that glance begged her to withdraw the injunction she had placed upon him.

Softly came the whispered response:

"Read him a lesson, since he is so persistent, but spare his life, unless the taking of it becomes absolutely necessary for the preservation of your own."

An eloquent glance from his lustrous eyes thanked her, and turning quickly toward the giant, whose injured feelings were by no means soothed by witnessing this brief conference, he spoke sharply and to the point:

"Do you put yourself forward as the champion of that woman, to avenge such wrongs as you may fancy I have done her?"

"Champion o' the fair sect—that hits me right whar I live!" ejaculated the giant, clearly tickled by the title.

"Good enough!" retorted Revolver Robinson with a short, hard laugh. "It would be a pity to balk such a gallant knight errant, and you shall have your will. Say when and how!"

"Don't keer a flip of a gar's tail!" was the prompt reply. "The Wall-eyed Pike o' the Peak kin swim in deep water or flip-flap his way through the ruffles—"

"Exactly: no doubt you are a remarkable fish and scaly customer generally, but empty blowing is not business. Say when and where you are willing to settle this affair?"

"Right now and here."

"Better still. Those who saw the beginning can see the ending, and judge for themselves. Have you any particular weapon which you prefer?"

"They ain't a minner's scale o' difference in the hull lot-an' b'lin' of 'em, fur as old Wall-eye's consarned," was the prompt reply, which did not sound at all like empty boasting as it came from his lips, though it may have that appearance when seen in print. "He kin shoot off the stinger of a bal' hornet flyin', an' do it so slick that the critter won't know he's lost anythin' ontel he tries to tickle the fast bar-footed boy he comes across. He kin split a hair with the point of a tooth-pick at a hundred yards, ten times out o' nine, or drive it through a two-inch slab o' steel at one lick. Them's what old Wall-eye kin do when he's in a good-humor, but when he gits his back-fur clear up—go 'wa all you little minners! They ain't words enough in all the dickshunaries to tell all he can't do."

"I want to know!" drawled Revolver Rob, his dark eyebrows forming an arch of mock surprise. "You quite startle me with your list of accomplishments, and though I am considered no slouch by those who ought to know, I am strongly tempted to draw out of the game before I'm teetotally busted."

The giant eagerly snapped at the bait.

"Ef I let ye off easy, 'il you agree not to come snoopin' round my swimmin' hole, tryin' fer to catch a nibble at yender dainty little shiner—"

A quick frown chased the sneering smile from the face of Revolver Rob at this unmistakable allusion to Dashing Della, and an imperious wave of his hand cut the speech of the giant short.

"On second thoughts, it would be a pity to disappoint these worthy gentlemen, and unless you prefer to play craw-fish, we'll settle the dispute right now and here."

"An' the ammeliferous madam yender kin act as referee," cheerfully amended Barnacle Bill, with a low bow toward Dashing Della, who smiled sweetly in response—so sweetly that the giant was emboldened to make an addition to his amendment. "An' whichever one o' us gits his nose rubbed in the dirt, hes got to droop his back-fur an' tail-feathers an' 'knowledge that t'other is cock o' the walk, an' the only one 'lowable fer to walk home with the ammeliferous madam from singin'-school an' sech like. How's that?"

A mischievous light filled the blue eyes of the siren, and ere Revolver Rob could reply, she said:

"So mote it be! Do your devoirs gallantly, gentlemen, and I will crown the victor with bays."

Revolver Rob was by far too deeply in love with Dashing Della to find fault with aught she could say or do, and gallantly bowed his acquiescence, while Barnacle Bill, with overweening confidence in his great prowess with both artificial and natural weapons, was even more eager in his acceptance.

He squared himself for a regular speech, but that Revolver Robinson would not suffer just then.

"My dear sir, pray spare our ears and our

breath. Time enough to crow after you have read me a lesson, which, of course, you are going to do."

"Anything to please the family," was the cheerful response. "The easiest critter in all the world to please, is this same Barnacle Bill, the one great an' 'riginal Wall-eyed Pike o' the Peak. Hunt your holes, ye little minners, fer this yer shovel-nose sturgeon which they call 'Volver Bobbus is jest spillin' fer to git mopped 'round in the dirt—"

He paused abruptly, eying his adversary suspiciously, for Revolver Robinson had advanced and was critically running his hand over the immense masses of muscle with which the arms and shoulders of the giant were endowed.

"Don't get nervous, old fellow," coolly uttered the gambler. "I'm not trying to put a spell on you, but simply to discover what you consider your best point. I mean to bet you, of course, and wish to do the job so thoroughly that it need not be gone over with again. You understand?"

"Durned ef I do!" ejaculated the puzzled giant.

"Yet it is very simple. For reasons of my own, I do not want to kill you outright, while still reading you a lesson which will not be forgotten in a hurry. In a dozen ways I might defeat you, and you would still be able to convince yourself, if none other, that I was favored by fortune, and that but for an imaginary accident, the result would have been reversed. I wish to avoid this, and I believe I have discovered the exact remedy."

Barnacle Bill scratched his head with a perplexed air.

"Your tongue runs so p'izen fast that I can't keep track o' your meanin', ef you've got any; but the odds is the difference! Long's the ammeliferous madam as referee is satisfied, old Wall-eye ain't a-goin' to kick."

"You left the manner of settling our difficulty with me, I believe?"

Barnacle Bill nodded shortly.

"Very well. You are a strong man, well put together—I can't remember when I've seen as big a man with so little useless lumber in his composition—and should be able to stand a pretty fair hug without squealing—"

"Ef you've got a grizzly bar which you want the ile tried out of without goin' to the trouble o' startin' a fire, jest fetch him along an' sling him into these 'ere fins!"

"Indeed!" and there was a thinly disguised sneer in the voice of the desperado. "Then I'm sadly afraid I have got into a bad box: but all the same I won't take water. I'll play the grizzly for this evening only."

"A far an' squar' stan'-up hug?" asked Barnacle Bill, his pop-eyes glistening. "No wrastlin' tricks—no trippin' an' sich like?"

"Unless you try them, I shall not," was the quiet response, not a little to the amazement of the crowd, for the desperado was well known as a proficient in all the cunning arts of the wrestler, and he seemed to be throwing away his sole chance of coming off victorious in the contest.

"Hold on, ye p'izen critter," cried Barnacle Bill, in a tone of unadulterated horror as he saw Revolver Robinson begin removing his tightly fitting garments. "Don't ye ferget that thar's a lady in the room—"

The desperado flushed hotly, while Dashing Della pressed her handkerchief to her lips to smother the laugh which almost mastered her. Barnacle Bill laughed sheepishly as he saw that there was no occasion for his alarm, his antagonist satisfying himself with removing coat and vest, and rolling his shirt sleeves up past the elbow.

His own preparations were equally short, consisting in removing the weapons from his belt and dividing his enormous beard into equal parts, then knotting the ends behind his neck. This done, the rivals confronted each other, and for the first time a critical comparison could be made between them.

At first glance the odds seemed terribly in favor of Barnacle Bill, and as she compared the twain, the face of Dashing Della grew a shade paler, as though she dreaded the result.

But the difference would not have seemed so great, had the two men been stripped to the buff. And those who looked the most closely saw that a wondering light came into the eyes of the giant, as though the development which seemed to have taken place in the desperado astonished him.

But he was given no time to study the puzzle out.

"Are you ready, gentlemen?" asked the clear voice of the fair referee, and when she received an affirmative reply from each, she added: "Time!"

Swift as lightning in his motions, Revolver Robinson secured the hold he had selected, before Barnacle Bill could make a move, locking his hands behind the giant's back, exactly over the center of the spine, and throwing his powers into full play, contracted his muscles until the great masses stood out on his own back and shoulders so that it seemed as though his joints must be split wide open.

The result was quickly seen, by

pletely as poor Barnacle Bill himself. So swiftly was the feat performed that even as his huge arms closed around his adversary, the giant found that he was almost paralyzed. His lungs had no room to play, and his really enormous strength was reduced.

At that moment, had he made the attempt with all his strength and skill, he might have raised the desperado from his feet and cast him backward, adding his great weight to the fall, but his naturally sluggish wits were utterly befogged, and ere he could decide what to do, that one chance was forever lost.

Steadily Revolver Robinson put his wondrous powers into full play, increasing that dreadful pressure until his hands of steel seemed to eat into the solid flesh, while his swelling bosom grew still closer to that of the luckless giant; fiercer and more deadly grew his gripe, until a gasping, gurgling cry welled forth from the lips of Barnacle Bill, then Revolver Robinson suddenly relaxed his grasp, slid one arm beneath the giant's thigh and seemingly without an effort raised the huge body to a horizontal position, holding it thus for a moment before lowering it gently to the floor.

Then the wild applause burst forth, and among the most enthusiastic voices was that of Dashing Della, who seemed to forget her sex for the moment, in admiration of that wonderful exhibition of strength and dexterity. For the moment the awe with which the desperado inspired the majority of those present was forgotten, and he was a popular idol.

Like a bashful youth Revolver Robinson blushed before this unexpected ovation, and then raised his hand to command silence as the gasping, bewildered giant staggered to his feet.

There was a dazed look in his great eyes, and a sickly smile crept over his face as he balanced himself before Revolver Rob and extended a trembling hand, saying in a husky tone, frankly and without a trace of malice:

"You said you'd do it an' you did! I tuck you fer a sucker, an' you was a full-grown whale! The Wall-eyed Pike gives in. He's ready to climb up the Peak an' pull the Pike after him. He ain't got no more use fer these rifles! Good-by, boss—an' you, angeliferous madam, farewell forever! The starch is all out o' my back-fin, an' my tail is forever clipped. I'm goin' back to whar I kin git up my muskle a-wrastlin' with grizzly b'ars, afore I tackle chain-lightnin' ag'in!"

CHAPTER X.

A PLEDGE FOR AN APPARITION.

A LITTLE grotesque the speech of the giant, perhaps, but what would have sounded like empty gasconade from common lips, seemed second nature to him, and nothing out of the way.

He looked wonderingly at the small white hand which Revolver Rob freely placed in his brawny paw, as though unable to divine from whence had come that terrible and suffocating gripe, and heaved a great sigh as he bowed his lion-like head over the hand of the blonde siren.

"Far'well, angeliferous madam—far'well ferever! It was a squar' barg'in, an' old Wall-eye ain't the man to go back onto his word. This swimmin' hole hain't got no more use fer him, an' he's gwine back to the kentry whar they don't do up dynamite an' niter-glyceren in britches an' long-tailed coats to make common critters think they is only men! I kin see now that I was a durned fool fer my pains, but I jest got one partin' wish: may the man o' your choice make ye as happy as the Wall-eyed Pike o' the Peak'd 'a' tried mighty hard to do, ef it hed bin on the keards fer you to smile onto him!"

As though afraid to trust himself to say more, Barnacle Bill dropped the hand of Dashing Della and rushed from the room, but leaving a far more favorable impression behind than he had brought with him.

"A genuine diamond, if still in the rough," said Revolver Robinson, in a low tone to Dashing Della. "I am doubly glad that you asked his life at my hands, because it would be a pity to kill such an oddity, and now that you have asked a favor at my hands, it emboldens me to beg one in return."

There was a deep significance in his tones that could not be mistaken, and there came a flush into the fair face of Dashing Della as her eyes met his burning gaze. She remained no reply, but turned aside and hurriedly took her seat once more at the faro table.

Revolver Robinson did the same, but he no longer seemed to feel an interest in the game, and his wonderful run of luck had come to an end, the cards now turning almost as squarely against him, and in the few minutes which belonged to the first half of the night, his heavy winnings were almost wholly absorbed by the bank.

Promptly on the first stroke of the clock which rang on the wall above her head, Dashing Della arose from her seat, though the deal was not yet completed. This was her regular custom—not a card would she turn after the hour of midnight had tolled—and so well known was it that the sudden movement occasioned no comment whatever, while a male dealer stood

ready to take her place the moment she vacated it.

Revolver Robinson also arose, and said in a tone distinctly audible to all:

"You must allow me to attend you as far as the door of your hotel, Miss Delsarte, for there was mischief in the eyes of that crazy woman, and she might try to stab you in the dark if alone and unprotected."

Dashing Della made no response, unless a slight bow of consent be thus considered, and together the twain left the Oasis behind them.

The heavy brows of the gambler contracted as Dashing Della silently ignored the proffer of his arm, and they walked on in silence, not a word passing between them until the door of the hotel in which they both had rooms was reached. Then Dashing Della spoke hurriedly:

"Good-night, Mr. Robinson. Of course you will attend the shooting-match to-morrow?"

But her question was passed unheeded, and there was a dogged earnestness in the manner of the desperado as he said:

"The night is young, yet, Della, and with your permission we will not part company just yet. In the parlor, if you object to receive me in your own rooms, but there are a few words which I must speak and you listen to, this night."

For a brief space there was silence, and the blonde siren stood with averted head so that her face was cast into deep shadow; but when she once more turned toward Revolver Robinson, her face was placid, and there was a brilliant light in her speaking eyes.

"Twice this night have you obeyed me, besides rendering me a great service, and I should be acting very ungratefully in denying your first request. Whatever you may have to say, I will listen to, and where there will be no danger of interruption. After all," and there was a slight ring of melancholy if not bitterness in the words, "why should I care for empty appearances? Am I not a branded being—a professional dealer at a public gambling table?"

Without waiting for the impetuous reply which sprang to the lips of Revolver Rob, Dashing Della turned and ran lightly up the steps leading to the hotel entrance, and biding his time, the gambler followed close upon her footsteps.

Dashing Della occupied two small rooms on the second floor, and five minutes later she and Revolver Robinson were seated together on a small sofa in the outer apartment, with the door closed and locked.

The gambler was no laggard in love, and lost but little time before coming to the point.

"You must know what it is I have resolved to say, Della," he uttered, taking her jeweled hand in both of his, a warm flush upon his handsome face, a brilliant light in his dark eyes. "My looks and actions must have prepared you for this."

Her blue eyes were downcast, there was a plainly perceptible trembling of the hand which he clasped so warmly, and the color from her cheeks slowly faded away, but she made no answer to his inquiring pause. He saw all this, but he drew no unfavorable augury from the signs.

"Just one short question—will you be my wife?"

"But you know so little of me—"

"Enough to feel confident that in winning your love, I will be the most perfectly blessed man alive!" was his swift interruption, his eyes glowing ardently.

"I am an almost perfect stranger to you," added Dashing Della, slowly, her eyes still downcast, her face paler than ever. "You know nothing of me save what rumor may have whispered, and those whispers, true or false, have not always been of the most complimentary nature."

Instantly the desperado flashed up.

"You are pure as the lily—not the faintest breath of suspicion can rest upon you—"

His impetuous speech was interrupted by a short, hard laugh from the red-ripe lips of the blonde siren.

"All men do not hold the same opinion—or women, either—as witness the events of this very night."

"The man was a drunken ruffian—"

"And the woman?" came the swift interpolation.

The words died away, and the dark brows contracted. The shot was a center one, and plainly rankled.

"She was crazy, and knew not what she said," Revolver Robinson slowly replied. "Surely you place no dependence in such a charge as she made?"

"Wild, it may be, but of too grave a nature to be entirely ignored after the serious question you have just put me," said Dashing Della, her eyes looking searchingly into his. "Be frank and honest, as you can be when you wish. What is, what has that woman been to you?"

For a moment the gambler hesitated, but with those searching eyes upon him, seeming to penetrate below the surface and to read his inmost thoughts, he dared not prevaricate or refuse to give the direct answer asked.

"It is a difficult task which you set me,

Della," he said, with an uneasy laugh that came only from his lips. "Not that I have been so much to blame," he added, quickly, as he saw the expression which came into her eyes, "but it will sound like bragging to say what I must, if you still persist."

"Can I do otherwise, after what you have asked me—unless, indeed," she added, quickly, "you are willing to drop the one matter with the other, for good-and-all?"

"That I will never do, while I can see the faintest glimmer of hope before me," was the ardent response. "Ask me what questions you will, and I'll answer them truly, without a shade of reservation—I swear it, by my hopes of winning you for my wife!"

"Your bare word is quite sufficient, for whatever may be your other failings, I know that lying is not numbered among them," frankly said Dashing Della.

A grateful light came into the dark eyes, but he made no spoken comment, waiting for the catechism.

"You called that—that lady by name?"

"Isolina Planillas, yes. She is Mexican born, but of Spanish descent, coming of a rich and honored family who have made their home in the city of Mexico for more years than I can calculate."

"She made the charge that you wooed and won her, under a different name from the one you now bear—that you robbed and then deserted her."

"One morsel of truth, the rest all false! It is an unpleasant task you set me, Della, but since you have asked for the whole truth, you shall have it."

"You know what I am: a gambler, a fire-eater in the eyes of mankind, and a terrible criminal in the estimation of many. Whether I have not had ample excuse for what sins I may have committed, is not the question now. When you give me the right to do so, if ever, then will be time enough to try and make myself appear less guilty in your eyes. Enough for the present that I had good reasons for wearing an assumed name while stopping on Mexican ground."

"Under the colors I then elected to wear, I was admitted into the innermost circles, and there I first met Isolina Planillas, the loved and honored wife of a Spanish officer."

"From the very first she seemed to single me out for her brightest smiles, and I was nothing loth for a flirtation to pass away the time which hung heavily on my hands, but upon my honor, Della, I never breathed one word into her ears which I would not have been willing her mother or her husband should hear."

"My stay in Mexico was short, but long enough to set the mad blood of that foolish woman on fire, it seems. I bade the Planillas adieu one night, and started early the next morning for the border. That night I stopped at a little town, and was just on the point of retiring, when Isolina Planillas, in the garb of a boy, rushed into my room and fell upon my neck, sobbing and begging me to save her."

"Bewildered and confused myself, I was trying to get her to explain, when a half a dozen armed men came rushing into the chamber, with Colonel Planillas at their head, fairly frothing at the mouth as he poured out bitter curses on my head and hers, accusing me of enticing her from him."

"I tried to explain, but he would not listen, drawing and firing a pistol almost in my face, then calling his fellows to show me no mercy, he assaulted me with sword in hand."

"It was not in my nature to stand and be murdered without striking a blow in self defense, and I met their attack as best I knew how."

"It did not last long, but when two of the fellows turned and fled, they left three dead men behind them; and one of the trio was Colonel Planillas."

"This was not my first visit to Mexican soil, and from past experience I knew that my only hope of escaping with whole bones lay in speedy flight. But Isolina Planillas was once more hanging around my neck, begging me not to desert her, not to leave her a helpless sacrifice to the relatives of her dead husband."

"I knew that her fears were well founded from my knowledge of Mexican nature in general, and the Planillas family in particular, so what could I do?"

"Take her with you," came the ready reply, and, with a grateful light in his dark eyes, Revolver Rob continued:

"And that is what I did do. I abandoned my baggage, and with Isolina on the 1000 miles at liberty, I rode out of town in the face of a scowling mob, whose will was good enough to tear me limb from limb, but whose fear of hard knocks was, luckily for all concerned, still more powerful."

"If we were chased we were never made aware of the fact, and reached the border in safety. Here I reasoned with the woman the best I knew how, promising to take her wherever she should select, suggesting that she stop at some convent until matters could be amicably arranged with her relatives, but all I could say was in vain. She said that I had taught her the

lesson of true love, and piteously begged me not to desert her now. And when I grew impatient at her folly, she vowed that she would kill herself unless I smiled upon her. And there was something in her face that told me she would surely make her threats good.

"Well, you can guess how it turned out. I did what any other man would have done in my situation. But instead of being happy and contented, as I honestly tried to make her lot, she grew more exacting and more jealous and suspicious every day. If I sinned, that sin brought with it its own punishment, for I was given not a moment's peace save when I could steal out of her sight. That could not last long, all things considered, and one day I folded my tent like the Arab, and as silently stole away."

"And to charge that you robbed while deserting her?"

"Issued from being true that I left with her nearly every dollar I had in my possession. As a proof of that, I shipped as a green hand on a vessel bound from Galveston to New Orleans, working my passage and landing without a cent in my pocket. And not only that, but as soon as I made a raise at the faro table, I sent it every dollar to the woman. This she must have received, since I never heard of the letter again."

For a few minutes neither of the twain spoke, Revolver Robinson patiently awaiting Dashing Della's decision.

"It is a sad story from beginning to end, and, though you were not wholly blameless, you acted better, all things considered, than would have done the majority of even those at whom the censorious world has never dared to point the finger of scorn."

The warm flush on the gambler's face deepened and a glad light filled his eyes, for the judgment was far more candid than he had dared hope for from one woman where another was concerned.

"I have told you all and kept back nothing," he said, after a moment's pause. "Will you not give as frank and open an answer to my question now?"

A quick motion of her white hand checked his impetuous speech, and her lustrous eyes gazed fixedly into his, watching every change recorded there as she spoke anew:

"You have given me the right to question you, and you must not find fault if I exercise that privilege to the utmost. You were not so greatly to blame as I feared in the unfortunate affair with this woman—but has there never been another? I do not ask through mere curiosity, for, remember, my future happiness may depend on your reply."

"Never have I known what true love meant until I saw you—the gambler declared, only to be cut short by that imperious hand.

"You mistake my meaning. I do not ask that much, for, as the past is ever dim in the light of the present, a man might easily forswear himself without intending to do so. What I ask is easier answered. Can no living woman make the same charge against you that Isolina Planillas brought, only with truth where her allegation proved false?"

Though his cheek grew a trifle paler, Revolver Robinson did not flinch from her searching gaze, and his voice bore the impress of truth as he made reply:

"Not a living woman, as I hope for mercy at your hands!"

"Nor dead?" was the swift addition. "Does the grave hold no such black secret—the secret of a murdered soul as well as a murdered body? Does the grim past hold no memory of a fair young creature who was lured from the straight path?"

With a black frown contracting his face and a lurid light in his eyes, Revolver Robinson cut short her words.

"Who has been slandering me to you? Who has dared pour such foul lies into your ears? Give me the name, and he shall eat his words while kneeling at your feet."

He ceased abruptly, for there was something in the wide opened eyes of the fair woman that told him he was doing his cause far more injury than good by his angry outburst.

Dashing Della freed her hand, and her voice sounded far more cold when she spoke again:

"No man has made any charges against you to me—why should they do so, or even should any one forget himself so far, why should I listen to them? What interest have I—"

"That of being the woman I love—the only one now or in the past since my sainted mother died! Can you not believe and trust me, Della? I do not claim to be a saint. I admit that my crimes have been many and deep, but never so black as you hinted just now. And even so, can you not help me to bury the black past—help me to live down the evil reputation circumstances far more than my own inclination have given me? Once more I ask you—be my loved and loving wife."

"You do not ask me what my past has been, though I have questioned you so mercilessly?"

"Why should I, when I am perfectly satisfied without knowing more? I have known you here for nearly half a year. During that time I have seen you thoroughly tried, tempted as

few women have been tempted without falling, yet not the faintest cloud of suspicion has or can rest upon your good fame. You have made enemies among those whose evil schemes you have resisted, and if there was the slightest loop-hole through which malice could wing a barbed arrow, it would have been sped long ere this."

Rapidly and even eloquently he spoke, and the blue eyes drooped before his ardent gaze, but the face of Dashing Della grew paler instead of flushing with the love-light for which he looked, and Revolver Robinson was forced to admit to himself that he had lost more ground than he could easily recover, by that ill-timed outburst. Yet he was not content to abide his time and wait for a more auspicious moment.

"You heard my question, darling," he breathed softly, his strong right arm stealing around her trim waist and drawing her still closer to his side. "Shall I repeat it?"

"Must I answer now? Will you not wait—"

"For what? You have eyes to see and a heart to feel. You must have known for months past that this moment would come sooner or later, and you would not be a woman if you had not decided on the answer to give long ago. Then why should we wait? If you can return my love, why should we wait longer before enjoying its perfect fruition? Or, if you cannot—which Heaven forbid!—why keep me in suspense when you know the blow must fall as heavily at last?"

He sought to turn the fair face toward him, in hopes of reading the answer there ere her lips could put it into words, but he was foiled in that expectation, for the features of a marble statue could not have revealed less.

"You should never press a lady for reasons which she can not or will not give," she said, with a faint smile which was but the shadow of the one he had hoped to receive. "I will not deny having long since seen that you regarded me as something more than a mere friend, nor say that the thought has not been a pleasing one to me, for both would be false, and your perfect frankness this night deserves a like candor on my part. Stop!" and she imperiously checked his ardor. "Hear me out before you say more."

"If you had put this question last night—or any other night during the past month, I do not think I would have hesitated in giving you a positive answer—"

"For good or for evil, which?" he asked, swiftly.

A rare smile swept over her face before replying.

"That would be for you to decide, not me. If the love which you claim to feel for me is genuine, then the answer I could have given then would not have driven you to suicide—"

He drew her to his breast and pressed hot kisses on her lips, but with a degree of strength for which he had not given her credit, Dashing Della freed herself from his ardent embrace, and stood erect as she added:

"Last night is not now, nor can I give you the same answer which you would have received then—"

"And why? What has occurred since then—"

"The appearance of that woman, and her melancholy story."

"But you said that you could not blame me for acting as I did in the case; then why punish me so severely?"

"Because—a woman's reason! Do not press me further to-night, or you may be the sufferer," cried Dashing Della, a little irritably.

"At least give me a gleam of hope to live on," he urged. "How long must I remain on probation?"

"Beyond this I will not answer," and there was an arch smile on the fair face of the blonde siren as she spoke, that caused the heart of the love-smitten desperado to flutter strangely within his bosom. "I pledge you my solemn word of honor never to fall in love with or marry any other man until you give me full permission—"

His strong arms wound themselves around her and his lips rained hot kisses upon hers, smothering her further speech until she glided from his embrace, frowning archly.

"You presume too much on too little, sir! Offend in a like manner, and I'll not only withdraw my pledge, but vow that I'll never marry—you!"

With no little difficulty Revolver Robinson managed to refrain from snatching another embrace, and possibly because she saw that his self-control was growing less with the passage of each moment, Dashing Della terminated the interview.

"I will see you to-morrow at the shooting-match, but now I must ask you to excuse me, for I am very tired and sleepy."

"One kiss to dream on," and without asking further permission, Revolver Rob took it, after which he left the room and sought his own chamber, on the same floor.

He retired at once, but it was late ere he could compose himself to sleep. He went over and over that interview with Dashing Della, in

his mind, with strangely mingled emotions. Now an oath of anger, now an exclamation of rapture would break from his lips, but at length his uneasy tossings ceased and his regular breathing told of senses fast locked in slumber; yet his brain was still busy, for at irregular intervals disconnected words and broken sentences would fall mutteringly from his feverish lips.

Suddenly he awoke—or was it not rather the continuation of that direful dream? A gasping cry of horror broke from his lips, and he sought to leap to his feet, but in vain. He could not move a limb—a mysterious spell seemed to be upon him—and a cold perspiration broke from every pore.

An unearthly, greenish light filled the room, and he fancied there was a dank, repulsive smell as from a charnel-vault. In the center of the light, apparently floating in the air, was a ghastly shape—that of a woman, young and once fair, but whose face was now livid and discolored as from mortification, with her long black hair dripping with water and tangled with sea-weed, while one long, bony finger pointed to a red blotch over the heart.

"Harold Kingsford," came a sepulchral voice from those ghastly lips. "Once more and for the last time gaze upon the face which you once swore was the most beautiful the sun ever looked down on—see to what it has been reduced, and all through you! But the time is near at hand when all those bitter wrongs will be avenged. Your race is well-nigh run, and by the grace of one more merciful than you, I have come to bid you repent your sins and make what preparation you can for leaving this world!"

Nearer and nearer that awful figure floated, until it stooped and touched the gambler on the forehead with an icy-cold finger, making there the sign of the cross.

"By this I claim you—by it I wed you, more surely than when you so cruelly deceived me when I fled from home, from my poor old mother and father to intrust myself to your love—which brought me to this!"

"Repent! for ere the month expires, you will have met your last reward! Repent—repent—"

The hollow-sounding words died away in a long drawn wail, and the ghastly shape seemed to fade into nothingness as the greenish light grew less distinct, finally vanishing and leaving the desperado in utter darkness.

Again he strove to arise, but still in vain, and with a wild, gurgling cry, his senses yielded and he lost all consciousness.

Was it reality, or but the continuation of his dream?

CHAPTER XI.

BARNACLE BILL SMITTEN AGAIN.

"GREAT pin-feathers from an angel's wing! Kin I believe me two spyglasses? This ain't—it can't be old Arizony, fer they don't raise sech vegetables as them thar—not muchly! The one great an' only 'riginal Wall-eyed Pike o' the Peak is drunk—drunk from center to circumference, from A to Ampersand—dead drunk, or else he passed in his checks when he didn't know it, an' hes jest opened his two eyes in glory, fer they ain't no sech annageliferous critters as them a-runnin' around loose onto the airth, an' I know it!"

Barnacle Bildad Tholuck was the speaker, as a matter of course, and there was a look of mingled wonder, doubt and admiration in his great eyes as he stared at the dainty little figure beyond him—a figure which, for unconscious grace and beauty, he had never seen equaled.

Early that morning Pet Flamsteed left the house, after a dreary, sleepless night. Though she had so boldly defied the power of Jasper Quigley, so bravely borne up against his evil threats while in his presence, none the less had she suffered terribly from that resurrection of the black and bitter past. Until he came like an ugly shadow, the poor girl-woman deluded herself into the comforting belief that no word or action would ever rake up those ashes, and there were times when she was even happy, despite the grisly skeleton which had haunted her for so long; but all that was past now.

While Jasper Quigley lived there could be neither peace nor safety for her. If the aim of Gold Mask had only proved treacherous enough to—

Thus far her wild thoughts carried her, time and again, but as often would Pet Flamsteed fight them away, for not even in fancy would she be the assassin of her ruthless enemy.

Forgetful of the peril which she might thus be incurring, Pet Flamsteed wandered hither and yon through the rocky fastnesses, at times slow and listlessly, like one in a waking dream, then swiftly, though she hoped thus to outrun her black and bitter thoughts. She knew not, cared not whether her restless footsteps were carrying her, nor gave a thought to the passage of time. Why should she?

Colonel Forrest Flamsteed had not returned from Newt Camp, though when he took his departure he told her he would do so at an

early hour, and she knew only too well what that meant. He had begun one of his protracted debauches, which might last for days or even weeks before his bodily powers yielded and gave place to "the horrors."

Until that occurred, and she was called upon to nurse him back to comparative health, Pet Flamsteed was free to go whither she would, so far as duty to others was concerned.

It so chanced that her wanderings led her across the path of Barnacle Bill, who, true to his expressed determination of the past night, was fleeing from the scene of his utter defeat at the hands of Revolver Robinson, and the sight of her beautiful face—even more lovely from all that she had endured since the sun last set—scattered his wise resolutions to the four winds of heaven.

Though he had so gracefully accepted that defeat, Barnacle Bill felt it none the less deeply, and as a partial solace he had not only drunk freely before leaving Nugget Camp, but took with him an ample supply of similar ammunition to beguile his weary retreat, which he sampled so freely that when he first caught sight of Pet Flamsteed, he was just drunk enough to fancy her something more than simple mortal, though whether angel or witch was beyond his power of divination.

With the clumsy cunning of one "half-seas-over," the Wall-eyed Pike o' the Peak succeeded in gaining a position from whence he could catch a fair view of her face, and the rare beauty of this struck him more forcibly than did the rich voluptuousness of the blonde siren on the past evening.

Nothing of the witch there—most assuredly an angel.

Had Pet Flamsteed been less wholly absorbed in her own bitter musings, she must long since have discovered the approach of the drunken giant, for he had lost his usual skill in stalking, thanks to his whisky-muddled wits, but as it was he succeeded in getting close to her before a more than usually clumsy stumble roused her from her reverie, and with a little exclamation of alarm she turned and faced him.

A bland smile broadened his massive face, and with one hand thrust into the bosom of his woolen shirt, Barnacle Bill essayed a dignified gesture with the other, overbalancing himself and almost falling at full length.

"Durn the onstidly ground! Reckon it was on a drunk las' night, an' hain't rightly got over it yet!" he muttered, balancing himself with some little difficulty.

Mechanically the little woman dropped a hand to the secret pocket in her dress where she usually carried a small but trusty revolver when away from the house, but for once she had forgotten it, and now found herself wholly unarmed.

She cast a swift glance around her, thinking of hasty flight from the man she knew was drunk, but to her dismay, she saw that she had wandered into a trap from which she could escape only by brushing close past the giant. Beyond her, and curving back on each side, ran a deep and wide canyon, its brink at this point being bordered with loose rocks so thickly that only a narrow passageway was left for retreat; and at the mouth of this avenue now stood the drunken man.

"You ain't cittin' skeered of me, anngeliferous madam?" asked Barnacle Bill, with a reproachful echo in his husky voice. "Me as wouldn't hurt a flea, ef so be it was of the feminine gender, an' I knowed it! Me, the great an' only simon pure Wall-eyed Pike o' the Peak! Me, the tumblin' tarrification o' little minners—the bilin' maelstrom that sucks in ev'rythin' from a sick angle-worm to a fuzzy goslin—the double-geared essence o' chain-lightnin' as sweeps the riffles with back flurp an' tail-a-wiggle—the annihilator o' alligator-gars an' tap-in' snorkles—sure death an' bloody destruction to all sech onginally critters, but the softest-hearted critter whar the gentle sect is concerned that you ever hearn tell on, me, Barnacle Billad chuck?"

His great eyes protruded and his huge cheeks swelled to give vent to his customary bugle-blast, but suddenly remembering in whose presence he stood, the giant choked back the unearthly sound, at the imminent risk of suffocation.

This long-winded riazmarele gave Pet Flamsteed time to recover her wonted coolness, and her alarm lessened as she more nearly comprehended the nature of the man by whom she found herself confronted. Had he been sober, she would have felt comparatively at her ease, for his face was not that of an ugly-dispositioned being, to say the least, but she knew only too well what complete alteration strong drink can effect even in the most generous of dispositions, and assuming a confidence which she was far from feeling at heart, Pet Flamsteed took a step forward, saying:

"Scared? no, of course not! What's the matter with you? You're a little out of your wits, I think, but I'll be right with you in a minute."

Barnacle Bill, who had been standing with his hands on his hips, looking at her with a

age, and the little woman was forced to stop short, not caring to place herself within reach of his hands if she could avoid doing so.

"Fer why should ye, sure enough!" echoed the giant. "Fer no airthly reason at all—by no manner o' means! 'Stead o' that ye ought to be tickled as I be—tickled at meetin' with your finny—finny, that's it!" and he nodded approvingly at his having found the proper word.

That vigorous nod was too much for his uncertain equilibrium, and he lurched heavily forward with a choking hiccup. Mistily realizing that he must fall, either purposely or otherwise, Barnacle Bill made a merit of necessity and dropped to his knees, then clasped his hands and leered languishingly up into the face of the startled little woman.

"Anngeliferous madam, the one great an' only 'riginal Wall-eyed Pike o' the Peak gits down onto his marrer-bones to do you honor! He slicks down his back-fin, an' combs all the kinks out o' his double-geared propeller—he paints a beauty spot in each one o' his shiny scales, an' begs you to look tharin an' diskiver the idol o' his lonesome heart! Smile onto the disconsolate critter, unless you want to see his pore gills dry up an' the light o' life fade out o' his wall-eyes forever! Anngeliferous madam, hear my prayer!"

There was something so utterly ridiculous in the drunken fellow's words, looks and attitude, that the anger which had sprung up in the heart of Pet Flamsteed at his impudence, was conquered by a strong inclination to laugh. This she managed to smother, but despite her will, a smile flashed over her face, and drunken though he was, Barnacle Bill saw and drew encouragement from it.

"Don't be skeered, anngeliferous madam, but let'er slide—say the word that'll make old Wall eye the happiest fish in all the swimmin' holes this side o' monkey-heaven! Ef it comes kind o' hard, an' you feel too fashful to spit it out with me a-lookin' at ye, jest give the teenyest bit of a wink, an' I'll shet all two both o' my eyes so I cain't hear nuthin' see ye—I will so!"

The smile died away more quickly than it had found birth, and the little woman flushed up warmly as she demanded:

"What do you mean? I don't understand you, sir!"

It was now the turn of Barnacle Bill to look astonished, and he did so to the very life.

"You ain't foolin'? Sure you ain't tryin' for to cood me?"

"Get out of the way and let me pass!" cried Pet now thoroughly angered. "You are a perfect stranger, and can have nothing to say that I am bound to listen to. Let me pass, if you are a gentleman and not a blackguard!"

Barnacle Bill stared at her in open mouthed amazement, his whisky-sodden brain incapable of understanding how he had given offense to this beautiful spitfire. But then a peculiarly brilliant idea struck him, and with a sheepish laugh, though not making any offer to arise or clear the way, he said:

"Anngeliferous madam, I ax your pardon a million times over, an' as much more atop o' that as yer kin wish fer. My heart is in the right place, even ef my tongue ain't quite as limber as it ought to be when talkin' to a female anngel in petticoats. The great trouble in this is the lack o' experience on my part. It's the first time I ever was called on to pop the question, an' ef I so much as it back end to most you mustn't lay it up aginst me too hard."

"Once more, will you let me pass?"

"Don't she do it nice an' nat'ral?" grinned Barnacle Bill, nodding and smiling to an unseen audience as he uttered this "aside." "Most any body would think she was in dead-open an' shot aimest, wouldn't they, now?"

Provoked, angered as she was, Pet Flamsteed could hardly restrain a laugh at the ridiculous notion, and as she began to believe that there was no actual harm in the drunken fellow, however annoying his persistency might be she took what promised to be the shortest method of extricating herself from an unpleasant dilemma.

"Since you persist in b-ing heard, say what you have to offer, in the fewest words possible," she uttered in a cold tone. "I have little time to waste in trifling."

"Didn't I tell ye so?" exclaimed Barnacle Bill, still in that theatrical aside. "Didn't I know she wasn't mad in up-an'-down aimest, but only a little putt out at my bein' seen a clumsy blit to ferget all I'd ever read an' hearn tell 'bout the anngeliferous critters?"

Turning his beaming countenance once more toward Pet Flamsteed, Barnacle Bill clasped one hand over his heart, and gracefully emphasized his words with the other.

"Anngeliferous madam, the one an' only great an' 'riginal Wall-eyed Pike o' the Peak axes your double-an' twisted pardin for makin' a long-geared jass-ack out o' hisself! Some onnily critter an' reperbate mought try to insinuate as I be a drunk—they might even try to make you think I wasn't clean got over it yet; but it ain't that as makes me so ferp'ful an' strabac'd. No, sir, anngeliferous madam, not by a jugful! It's all about o' my thinkin' an' a-ponderin' an' a-weepin' over the lonely lot

which a spiteful fate has squatted me down into without axin' me so much as I, yes or no!"

"Will you oblige me by coming to the point as quickly as possible, sir?" impatiently demanded Pet Flamsteed.

Still more blandly smiled Barnacle Bill, it that be possible, at what he regarded as the very natural impatience of a young lady who only waits a fair excuse for saying the all important yes. And clearing his voice, he resumed:

"Ef thar's any one pint onto which old Wall eye prides hisself more then another, it is that of slingin' his talk straight to the bull's-eye, without wastin' a grain o' powder in sightin' shots. When he's got anythin' to say, he says it, an' don't go sloppin' his breath all over the kentry, like some o' them two-legged talkin' machines you read about, he don't—not much!"

In utter despair the little woman uttered no further protest, but sunk down on a reek, summoning what patience she could, letting the drunken giant take his own time.

Dimly conscious that something was going wrong, Barnacle Bill spurred up his wandering wits and returned to the point:

"Tain't good fer a man-critter to back it all his lonesome self—we've got the word o' the good book fer that, as melibe you've hearn tell, anngeliferous madam. When I was young an' foolish I didn't take it to heart so much, but old Wall-eye has cut his wisdom teeth at last, an' yare he is, on a still-hunt fer a wife. Lookin' fer some anngeliferous madam who'll agree to cook his chuck, keep his shack in apple-pie order, putt buttons onto his shirts, half-sole his britches an' sing the young-uns to sleep when it comes roostin'-time."

"That's the one side; now look at the other."

"Right yare on his marrer-bones is a smart chunk o' a man, ef I do say so, which he'd n't orter. Forty year old, but sound as a dollar, without wind-gall, quarter crack, splint or spavin, an' soople as a two year old chuck-full o' new oats! A man as kin jump funder, kick higher, squeal louder, strike harder, shoo straighter, eat more chuck an' swaller more stiff budge—that is," with a dim idea that somehow he was on the wrong tack, "who kin love a little woman ten times more then ary other two-legged critter that walks the footstool!"

At this juncture the love-lorn giant paused to catch his br ath and observe the effect of his elquence on the object of his sudden adoration. It was hardly all that he could wish for, though the emotions of the little woman were about equally divided between indignation at the fellow's unparalleled impudence and a strong sense of the ludicrous. But Barnacle Bill was too much in earnest to be easily daunted, and so he pluckily picked his flint to try again.

"That's the man, an' now fer the trimmin's, anngeliferous madam. An' when it comes to that, the one great an' only 'riginal kin spread hisself with the best an' toniest of them. Ef he don't kerry a gold mine in each one o' his britches pockets, tain't 'cause he don't got 'em, no, sir! Ef you like, you kin throw nuggets o' gold out o' the window with a shovel all day long, an' old Wall-eye'll never kick. Only say the word—say you'll marry me—"

An imperious gesture from the little woman cut him short.

"You have said enough. I flatly decline the honor. If there is a spark of manhood about you, arise and let me pass."

With these words Pet Flamsteed advanced, and Barnacle Bill, like one stupefied, staggered to his feet unsteadily, as he did so flinging out one hand which closed on her shoulder.

A sharp cry of mingled indignation and fear broke from her lips, seeming the signal for a spiteful pistol crack.

With a choking groan, Barnacle Bill fell like a log.

CHAPTER XII.

SAMSON AND DELILAH.

PET FLAMSTEED uttered a gasping cry of horror and staggered back as the giant fell at her feet with that horrible groan, so suddenly overtaken by a terrible retribution. Only for the support lent by one of the howlers nigh, the little woman must have fallen, for a bloody mist spread before her eyes, and her limbs failed her.

Like one in a dream, she heard a cheering shout, and a moment later, warm hands clasped her in a close embrace. Like magic, her strength returned, and wrestling herself free, Pet Flamsteed stood at bay, for as yet she had failed to recognize the one who had rescued her from the grasp of the tipsy giant.

"You are not hurt? That scoundrel did not do you any injury?" came the swift inquiries in an agitated tone.

As a puff of wind dispels a fog-wreath, so the sound of that voice cleared the misty blur from before the eyes of the little woman, though she could not say that she had ever heard it before, but there was an interest in it such as none save one wholly friendly could have manifested, and that sickening fear which had overcome the poor hunted girl-woman, that she had

A little company, not much more by the
order of the day, is to be formed, and

[illegible]

cutioner, now, and unless this abominable criminal humbly begs for that mass of hair, it must and shall pay the penalty!"

For a moment it seemed as though Barnacle Bill was about to humble himself as hinted, to save his cherished beard, but then all the manhood in him took fire, and he only said:

"I kin an' do ax pardin a thousan' times over fer any harm I've done you two, an' eat the words I said when I was fool-drunk, but that's as fur as I kin or will go!"

"So much the better for those poor, silly girls whose hearts are taken captive through their eyes," retorted Dashing Della, with a hard, mocking laugh, as she took the hairy mass in her hand and mercilessly applied the keen edge of the knife. "From bitter experience I know how dangerous such a decoration can be in the possession of a graceless Lothario."

Never a word spoke Barnacle Bill as the heavy strands fell one by one before the knife, but there was a hard-set look on his face, an ominous glow in his great eyes that should have warned the fair barber. But if she saw this, no sign betrayed the fact, and cool as an iceberg, she went on with her work, now and then stepping back a pace to complacently view the effect.

This was even more startling than that of decrowning and only with the greatest difficulty could she keep from laughing outright at the wonderful transformation. Little fear of even the most impressionable girl or woman falling in love with the giant now! His goggle-eyes were brought out into almost painful relief, and the lion-like look had entirely vanished.

Flushed with shame, and feeling as angry against the merciless woman as she was against herself for the part she had taken in the degrading punishment, Pet Flamsteed stood with averted face, longing to depart, yet restrained by a fear lest her absence would make Dashing Della still more cruel.

At last the job was completed to her satisfaction, and Dashing Della drew back, viewing her victim, her head on one side, her arms akimbo, and a roguish smile in her lustrous eyes.

"Really, my dear sir," she said, drawlingly, "I fear I have bettered it but very little. You are even more bewitching than before. But that can't be helped now."

"Ef you're through, mobbe you'll turn me loose now?" uttered Barnacle Bill, in a subdued tone, which was in strong contrast with his customary manner of speaking. "Or do you reckon it'd prove my looks any to take off my hull hide? Ef so, don't be bashful or stan' on saremony—go the hull porker while ye're at it! It's your funeral—I hain't got a blamed word to say!"

"That will be the next lesson, should another ever be required," was the cool retort. "I have punished you all I intended, for the present, unless you look upon the good advice I am about to give you in the light of punishment."

"It may be briefly summed up: William Tholuck, beware of 'budge!' There is the making of a good man in you, good and true if you only steer clear of strong drink. When sober, you are a man any one may be proud of claiming as a friend, though your manners are a trifle rough; but that don't count in this country. When drunk, you are just the contrary; a disgrace to the form you wear, a nuisance to those who would otherwise be your friends, and a laughing-stock for your enemies."

"Do not pour spirits into your stomach to steal away your wits. Keep your head cool, your conscience clear, your heart frank and honorable. If you seek for a wife, do so after the fashion of a man, not as a windy blowhard, for of such is utter abomination of all women who are worthy the name!"

The hard light in the great eyes of the giant grew softer as Dashing Della rapidly uttered these words, for there was no trace of mockery in her earnest tones now—nothing but genuine good-will and sincerity. Even Pet Flamsteed, though one woman is proverbially harder to conciliate by another of the same sex than the most obdurate man, began to soften toward the fair gambler.

"If the lesson I have read you, seems a hard and bitter one to you now, the time will come when you may think different, if you will reflect soberly on the insults you poured upon this lady. I will now release you—"

"No, you don't!" cried a sharp, unpleasant voice. "Up with your hands, or I'll blow you to glory, woman or no woman!"

CHAPTER XIII.

JASPER QUIGLEY PLAYS A LONE HAND.

If ever mortal being was completely taken by surprise, that person was Dashing Della on the present occasion.

The voice which uttered those unpleasant words, in a yet more unpleasant tone, sounded from directly behind her, and at no great distance away. She saw from the startled look which so suddenly came into the great eyes of the giant, that the warning was a genuine one.

"The dirty cuss has got ye kivered, an' thar's shoot in the two eyes o' him!" muttered Barnacle Bill, warningly, as he read a desperate resolve in her white face. "Don't try it now—wait fer a better chance—"

"Not another word, you overgrown idiot, or I'll send a bullet exploring your empty skull!" snarled the voice, menacingly. "And you, Dashing Della, up with your hands, or it'll be the worse for your health! Hold up, I say!"

There was no alternative save death, and Dashing Della accordingly lifted her hands above her head, though her face said that the dose was bitter indeed. But what else could she do? Even the knife which she had used in barbering Barnacle Bill had been replaced in her bosom, and long ere she could hope to draw, cock a pistol, wheel and sight the unknown, he could riddle her with bullets at will. The giant was helpless, and poor Pet Flamsteed, with one startled glance in the direction from whence the snarling voice came, uttered one low cry—pronounced one name—then sunk down helpless, her already overtaken senses giving way beneath this increased strain—for the face which she recognized, the name which she uttered, was that of Jasper Quigley, her mortal foe!

Dashing Della saw the fall, heard that moan, and a look that was terrible in the intensity of its hatred came into her face. From that moment Jasper Quigley counted one more enemy who would be satisfied only when death had canceled his crimes.

However little he may have cared for that, in i-self, it was clear that Jasper Quigley was a very prudent man, and resolved to run no unnecessary risks, for he sent his voice warningly before him as he began his descent of the rocks:

"Remember my warning, Dashing Della! At the very first sign of trickery on your part, I'll let fly and leave you a feast for the coyotes and buzzards!"

A bitter, mocking laugh came from the lips of the blonde siren, followed by the still more bitter words:

"A brave man, truly, to threaten a poor, defenseless woman after such a brutal fashion! And as you do so, I can detect your voice trembling with fear, coward that you are."

"Rail on, Miss Spitfire!" retorted the villain, her taunts glancing from his thick hide as though she were hurling cambric needles at a rhinoceros. "You talk and I'll act. Better a cautious coward than a bull-headed fool who dares too much and so loses all. I've heard of you before, and how well you know how to use the weapons you wear. I'm not anxious to be a target for your bullets, and as long as my head keeps cool, I'll run no unnecessary risks. I saw how you handled that overgrown lum-mox, yonder, and don't care about sharing his fate."

Barnacle Bill writhed in secret at this taunt, and his uncovered face flushed hot with anger at the uncomplimentary epithet. He strained at his bonds, but they had been thoroughly applied, and he failed to free himself, his efforts being cut short by the watchful villain, whose keen eyes detected the attempt as soon as begun.

"None o' that!" and Barnacle Bill saw the revolver muzzle shifted so as to cover his form, while those dark eyes glittered above the polished tube of death. "None of your nonsense, or it will be all the worse for you. I have no particular quarrel with you, and will leave you as sound as I found you, unless I am driven to put a stopper on a fool. You can understand plain English?"

A sullen growl from Barnacle Bill was the only reply, but the giant realized the worse than folly of tempting the malignant scoundrel further, and ceased his efforts.

Using the utmost caution, Jasper Quigley made his way over the broken rocks and down to the level where the three persons whom he had so unexpectedly entrapped, were.

"Keep your hands up, my dear," he said, approaching Dashing Della from behind, still holding his revolver in readiness for instant use. "I know it is awfully ungallant, and all that but I am playing for too large a stake to throw away a single chance, even at the risk of incurring your undying hatred."

"Do your dirty work, since you must, but do not add torture to outrage," sharply uttered Dashing Della. "Spare us the infliction of your odious voice, at least."

Despite the thickness of his skin, Jasper Quigley was stung by the ineffable contempt and loathing which filled the voice of the blonde siren, nor was this feeling at all lessened by the jeering laugh which broke from Barnacle Bill.

"Drop that, you clumsy dog!" he snarled, flashing a venomous glance at the giant. "Drop that, or I'll soon make you laugh out of the other side of your mouth! And as for you, my dainty darling, you will do well to keep a still tongue while your head is in the lion's mouth—"

"Sneaking coyote, rather—begging pardon of the animal for the odious comparison!" retorted Dashing Della.

A short laugh, but with little of mirth in it, came from the thin lips of the angered villain. He had sense enough, though, to see that he

was likely to gain little by such an encounter of tongues, and said, sharply:

"Keep your hands up. Offer to lower them, and so much the worse for you. I've gone too far to stop at trifles now, and if I have to treat you roughly, blame yourself, not me."

As he spoke, Jasper Quigley stooped and ran his left hand around the waist of Dashing Della, searching her for the weapons which he knew she wore somewhere about her person. He found and secured a revolver, but at that instant Dashing Della made a desperate attempt to turn the tables.

Swiftly lowering one hand and snatching the keen knife from her bosom, the blonde siren wheeled and struck at the villain so viciously that, had the weapon reached its intended destination, Jasper Quigley would have reaped death as the sole reward for his complicated plottings. But it was not so to be.

Knowing from popular hearsay that the blonde siren was a dangerous woman when fairly aroused, the rascal never once suffered his watchfulness to relax, and as she turned upon him he ducked his head and dexterously warded off the flashing weapon with his left hand, while with the other he dealt her a cruel blow on the temple with his clubbed pistol.

Without a cry or moan, Dashing Della reeled back and sunk to the ground, knocked senseless.

As he saw this dastard blow, Barnacle Bill uttered a roaring cry of rage, and struggled fiercely to burst his bonds, but swiftly as thought, Jasper Quigley wheeled upon him, and fired a shot almost in his face.

"Take that, thou uneasy elephant!" he snarled, for the moment believing that he had slain the bound giant.

But he was mistaken. Barnacle Bill was still living, though his escape had been almost miraculous. At the very moment of firing, his head had made a backward movement as he strove to break asunder his bonds, and the dastard's bullet, instead of piercing his brain, only cut across his forehead, taking part of the shaggy eyebrow with it.

Stunned and bewildered by the benumbing shock, Barnacle Bill ceased his efforts, his shorn head drooping, the red blood trickling down over his lap, the picture of a dead or dying man; and that Jasper Quigley for the moment so considered him, was evident from his actions.

Dropping both weapons, without further thought for the Wall-eyed Pike o' the Peak, Quigley took a coil of rope from where it was wound about his waist, and with a noose he drew the arms of Dashing Della behind her, fastening them at the elbows. Grasping her form beneath the arms, he dragged her to a rock much the same as that to which Barnacle Bill was tied, and propping her back against it, proceeded to bind her fast.

The rope was a common lariat, such as is used to picket out horses at night when traveling, and had been brought with him by the thoughtful scoundrel for the precise purpose in which it was now employed.

The explanation of his sudden appearance on the scene can be readily accounted for.

After his unceremonious dismissal from the Flamsteed ranch, by Gold Mask, on the evening before, Jasper Quigley had concluded to beat a speedy retreat, though by no means abandoning all hope of yet succeeding in the foul plot he had been so many days in concocting and bringing thus near completion.

Through that night he thought the matter over in all its bearings, and concluding to go for reinforcements, before renewing his attack, he mounted his horse and was this far on his way, when the curious actions of Barnacle Bill attracted his attention, and he hid his horse, then crept forward just in time to see the Wall-eyed Pike o' the Peak grasp Pet Flamsteed by the arm, then fall like a dead man before the aim of Dashing Della, whom he instantly recognized, having seen her during his brief stay in Nugget Camp.

His curiosity was excited by her appearance, and the answers which he received to the questions he put, convinced him that the fair gambler was a dangerous woman when her passions were fairly aroused, and now as he saw how she handled the giant, Jasper Quigley was more than ever of that opinion. Yet the sight of Pet Flamsteed made him resolve to dare all rather than lose this chance of winning his long-coveted reward.

Lying in ambush until he saw that the women were not likely to leave the spot very soon, Jasper Quigley stole away to where he had left his horse, and securing the trail-rope, he crept as cautiously back.

He, as well as Barnacle Bill was completely deceived by the admirable manner in which Dashing Della played her part, and was in hopes that the giant would be left bound to the rock, while the women separated, thus giving him a chance to capture Pet Flamsteed without anything like a struggle. On this chance he waited until he dared wait no longer, when he interfered as given in detail.

When Dashing Della was fairly disposed of to his satisfaction, Jasper Quigley turned to where

Pet Flamsteed still lay on the rocks, though it was evident that her lost senses were rapidly returning to her, for as the exulting villain bent over her, she shrunk away with a low cry of horror.

"A heartless laugh came from his lips, and there was a devilish glee visible in his snake-eyes as he spoke:

"My turn has come again, you see, little one. There is no gallant road-agent here to act as your champion now, and not even Heaven itself can save you from my clutches this time."

"Have mercy!" gasped the poor woman, faintly. "Why do you persecute me so mercilessly? Have I not already suffered sufficiently for any mistake I may have made in the past?"

"There is only one reparation you can make that will satisfy me," was the swift reply. "Make good the vows you plighted before that man came between us with his bags of gold. Become my wife, and together we will bury the black past so deep that not even the trump of resurrection day shall unearth it. Refuse, and—"

"I do refuse, now and forever!" cried Pet Flamsteed, with a flash of her wouted spirit. "Though the charge you have made against me is a foul lie, yet were it true, and did I know that you could and would prove it against me, yet still I would scorn and defy you, as I do now—traitor and coward!"

With flashing eyes she confronted him, and for a moment the arch-villain cowered before her indignation, fearful that she was armed, but as the little woman made no sign of this, he quickly recovered his composure.

"So much the worse for us both, if that is the case," he said, with a cruel laugh. "I have pointed out the only hope of cheating the gallows: think well before you reject it, for I am a desperate man, now, and will win the stake I am playing for, or drag you down to perdition with me!"

A sound from Dashing Della attracted his attention, and turning, he saw that she had recovered her consciousness and was vainly striving to release herself. Her efforts suddenly ceased as she saw that his attention was drawn toward her, and in a husky tone she cried:

"Villain—unprincipled scoundrel! you will not leave us here, bound and helpless?"

There was something almost ridiculous in the strong contrast between that exclamation and the question which so closely followed it, and Jasper Quigley grinned as he replied:

"Pray for some one to chance along and find you before the mountain wolves scent the feast which awaits them, for I have neither the time nor the inclination to bother more with you. Live or die, just as fate decides; I care not which."

Turning once more to Pet Flamsteed, he grasped her by one arm, bending until his harsh face almost touched hers as he hissed forth the words:

"I have gone too far to retreat now, even if I wished. You must do one of two things. Yield to me—swear that you will marry me when and where I ask you, and on my part I pledge you my honor that you shall never have cause to regret taking that step. I will treat you like a queen. You shall roll in riches. You shall want for nothing that money or love can procure for you. Your word shall be my law, and I will be the humblest, most loving slave that ever woman had kneeling at her feet. All this, if you swear what I ask!"

Jasper Quigley paused in his impetuous speech to learn what effect it had; but though Pet Flamsteed spoke not, the manner in which she averted her face and shrunk away from him, was far more eloquent than mere words. The evil light grew deeper in his snake-like eyes, and his bony fingers increased their pressure until a low moan of pain escaped her lips. But there was no mercy for her in him now.

"You refuse? Beware! Even yet I would save you from the gallows, for despite myself I cannot forget those days in the long ago when you swore that you loved me—when I lived for a few brief weeks in a fool's paradise, only to awaken in hell!"

"Mercy! Spare me!" gasped the poor girl-woman, shrinking in terror from that mad light which seemed to scorch her as it streamed from those glittering eyes, for she believed that Jasper Quigley had suddenly gone crazy. "Merciful Heaven! is there no hope—no one to rescue me from this demon?"

"Only death!" was the hissing response. "My bride or his! Take your choice between my love and a gory winding sheet—"

"The last, then!" cried Pet Flamsteed, suddenly rallying and speaking with a desperation born of utter despair. "Kill me, since you will not relent—kill me at once, and have it over with!"

For an instant Jasper Quigley hesitated, but then, with a ferocious laugh, he caught the little woman up in his arms and bore her over the rocks, pausing on the very brink of the deep canyon, holding her light form over the verge, so that she could look down into the dizzy depths.

"Look! See those rocks at the bottom? One who was to fall upon them, starting from this point, would not suffer much—only the brief torture of the swift descent through empty air! Look well—look close! For, true as the sun shines in the heavens above me, I will hurl you down to meet your death upon those cruel rocks, unless you take the solemn oath which I am ready to dictate. Reflect—and speedily!"

There was a deadly determination in his tones, and Pet Flamsteed knew that he meant all he said, but she would not yield. He saw this, and his stern gripe tightened, but at that critical moment a wild, savage roar rent the air, like that of a lion!

CHAPTER XIV.

BARNACLE BILL REDEEMS HIS CREDIT.

FROM only one pair of lungs could that leonine roar have issued—those of Barnacle Bill, the Wah-eyed Pike o' the Peak.

The giant had been very drunk when he first addressed Pet Flamsteed, and up to the moment when he made that unlucky stumble and grasped her by the shoulder with the instinct which leads a drowning man to catch at a straw, each fleeting instant but intensified that intoxication, until he not only lost all control of himself, but was actually unconscious of doing or saying anything.

But from the instant that he was stricken down by the bullet of Dashing Della, his cure began, rapidly progressed through all that followed, until deep shame and humiliation left him sober as he ever was in the course of his life.

Had he been set at liberty immediately after Dashing Della completed her barber-ous punishment, there is little doubt but what the giant would have sought revenge of some sort upon the destroyer of his sole claim to beauty, but the good advice which the blonde siren so earnestly gave him, softened his feelings of resentment, and he remembered that if his punishment had been severe, so his conduct had been unpardonably rude and insolent. This was the entering wedge, and ere Jasper Quigley had fairly completed his capture of Dashing Della, the native chivalry of Barnacle Bill was fired and he was not only ready but eager to fight to the death in defense of the woman who had shorn him of his crowning glory.

Nor did his hair-breadth escape from death at the hands of the arch-villain quench his chivalric ardor, though he was wise enough to hold his feelings more in check, while striving all the time to free himself from his bonds.

He had only partially succeeded in this, when Jasper Quigley dragged Pet Flamsteed to the verge of the canyon, and there threatened her with instant death in case she persisted in her defiance of his wishes.

Though the back of the scoundrel was turned toward him, Barnacle Bill believed that Jasper Quigley was in deadly earnest when he uttered the fierce threats which came to the hearing of the two bound captives, and a momentary glimpse of the flushed, satanic countenance as the villain turned part way around in swinging the light form of the maiden from the ground, but served to confirm this belief, and lent him ten-fold strength for the time being.

The silken sash which bound him to the rock was torn asunder, and leaping erect as the leather thongs on his ankles gave way, that lion-like roar burst from the lips of the infuriated giant as he bounded toward Jasper Quigley.

The villain wheeled swiftly as he heard that menacing cry, and the mad flush faded from his countenance at the sight of that terrible foe, but the same glance showed him that the giant bore no weapons other than those bestowed upon him by the hand of nature, and with a snarling cry, such as a hungry wolf might give when being driven from a hardly-earned feast, he dropped the form of Pet Flamsteed on his left arm, snatching a revolver from the belt at his waist with the other.

Barnacle Bill saw the action, but the same mad fury which urged him to make the assault without losing time in arming himself, rendered him blind to the death which stared him in the face, and on he dashed, to reel and stagger like one in receipt of a mortal wound as the revolver of the villain exploded spitefully.

"Ah ha!" snarled Jasper Quigley, as he peered through the puff of smoke and saw the giant stagger and sink upon his knees. "Die, you bull-headed fool—Hell and fury!"

Chokingly the furious imprecation came forth from the throat of the villain as he saw Barnacle Bill recover himself and dash forward with that same deadly hatred glaring in his goggle eyes, for he knew that it could end only in his death should he not be able to check that huge form before those mighty hands closed upon him.

There was yet enough space between them—some half-score yards of thick-lying boulders—to grant him time for one more deliberate shot, and, dropping the half-fainting form of Pet Flamsteed, Jasper Quigley steadied his revolver with both hands as it rose to a level and followed the leaping giant.

At such short range, even at a flying target, a shot could hardly help but prove fatal, and

the assassin showed his teeth in a devilish grin as he pressed the trigger with a finger that was steady as fate, when the gigantic form of Barnacle Bill was scarcely three yards away.

But once again was he doomed to be foiled, for Pet Flamsteed, with a courage born of desperation, sprung to his side and flung her whole weight against his arms, destroying his aim and turning him half-way round.

A curse of fury escaped his lips as the pistol exploded harmlessly, but ere he could do more, Barnacle Bill leaped over the intervening rocks and clutched him with a maddened grasp, in which the arch villain was helpless as a child.

Those brawny hands closed until it seemed as though flesh and bone must be crushed to a pulp under their terrible pressure; then, shrieking in horror, the form of Jasper Quigley was raised from the ground, heaved high above the bristling head of the giant, then hurled as from a mighty catapult over the rocks, through the air—where?

Down through empty space—down into the yawning jaws of the canyon!

One frightful screech of mortal terror—a brief silence—then a sickening crash!

It was not through deliberate intention that Barnacle Bill chose this terrible doom for the villain. Hard hit, feeling that he had received his death-wound, the giant was wild, mad, boiling over with a deadly rage that knew no reason, with a bloody mist obscuring his eyes, knowing not whither he hurled his craven foe. He only thought of killing this devil before he himself was conquered by death, and as that frightful screech came back to his ears, his powers suddenly failed him, and with a gasping groan he sunk down in a helpless heap.

Instantly Pet Flamsteed was beside him, vainly striving to raise his blood-stained head, calling him by name, sobbing with mingled horror and grief. But there came no answering word, no sign from the giant, and she felt that he was indeed dead—that he had given his life to preserve that of one who had been a party to the shameful humiliation which had been heaped upon him.

"Help me—cut me loose!" cried Dashing Della, but the sobbing woman heard her not, for, as if in answer to the burning tears which fell from her eyes upon the face of her preserver, the giant gasped—drew a short breath—then struggled to a sitting posture.

"Back fin up an' tail a-wigglin'," he muttered, faintly, his huge paws closing mechanically on the trembling hand of the little woman, but as a burning tear dropped upon his skin, the blurring mists seemed to clear away from before his eyes, and he gazed wonderingly into the face which was bent over him. "You cryin', an' angel-iferous madam! An' fer me!"

Pet Flamsteed stooped until her lips touched his hand.

"You saved my life, at the expense of your own! It was not worth it—it was not worth it!"

"Then that p'izen cuss?" gasped the giant, as he strove to arise, but his strength was not equal to the task, and the cold perspiration started out on his forehead in great drops.

"I kin see it all now," he muttered, huskily, his words separated by a choking rattling in his throat. "I remember—that p'izen cuss was goin' to throw you over the ditch, but I fooled him—old Wall-eye fooled him, he did!"

"Do not try to talk—you are not strong enough—"

A husky, rattling laugh from the ashen lips of the giant cut her short. A hectic flush came into his face, and his bony fingers closed upon her hand as though they would crush it; but the brave little woman never flinched, for she felt that this diamond in the rough was dying—dying for her sake, in her defense.

"Strong enough! I kin out-pull a team o' elephants, kin throw a buffler bull forty rod with only a bob-tail bolt, play jack-stones with the Rockies, an' with a brace for my toad-smashers, kin hold the 'arnal airth from turnin' 'round, an' that without once spittin' on my han's!"

Gasping for breath, Barnacle Bill ceased speaking, and his denuded head drooped until his face rested upon the little hand which he still held, though with a rapidly weakening grasp. Though she strove to do so, Pet Flamsteed was unable to utter a word; for the moment she felt as though she loved this rough diamond—that with his death she would be deprived of her dearest, only friend.

As a candle flickers up in its socket when on the point of going out forever, so the giant seemed to revive for a moment, with the ruling passion strong as ever, for he muttered:

"Back-fin up an' tail a-wigglin'! Seat! ye little minners, fer the one an' only great an' 'riginal Wall-eyed Pike o' the Peak is on the war-path, jest a-boomin'! Blood in his two eyes, ha'r on his teeth, rattlesnake p'izen on each one o' his spine, an' a chromo painted onto each and every shiny scale! Cl'ar the rifles, fer hyar we come—double distilled lightnin'!"

His face blood-red, his goggle-eyes glowing like living coals of fire, Barnacle Bill leaped to his feet and pealed forth his ringing war cry

—a prolonged yell that caused the rocky hills to echo and ring again until a thousand demons seemed to have been awakened from their slumbers, then—

The unhealthy flush died out of his face, and that burning glow faded to a glassy stare at vacancy, while the giant figure tottered and swayed like a storm-tossed pine; his bony fingers clutched first at his breast, from which the red blood was steadily flowing, then wandered up to his throat, tearing at it like one who is suffocating.

"What's the matter?" he gasped, huskily. "I can't see—I can't breathe—I'm feelin' fainty—Lord God! I'm dyin'!"

One gurgling groan, and the giant form collapsed, falling like an overthrown tree, then lying without sense or motion.

Horror-stricken, Pet Flamsteed knelt there, covering her eyes to shut out the haunting, distorted face, unheeding if she heard the cries of Dashing Della.

The fair gambler had not recovered from the blow which Jasper Quigley dealt her, until just as Barnacle Bill was in the act of leaping upon the villain. She called once to Pet Flamsteed to release her, but then, as that strange scene progressed, she remained spellbound until the giant fell.

Again and again she called to the cowering woman to hasten and cut her bonds, but without result until she cried:

"He may not be dead—there may yet remain a chance of preserving his life if you will only set me at liberty—"

Pet Flamsteed sprang to her feet at this and hastened to the side of the blonde siren, tearing at her bonds with unsteady, trembling fingers.

"Take the knife—over yonder it lies," hurriedly cried Dashing Della, nodding to where the weapon had fallen when the revolver of Jasper Quigley felled her senseless.

Moving like one in a dream, the little woman obeyed, and then Dashing Della leaped to her feet, rushing over to where the giant lay and kneeling beside him.

It needed only the one glance to convince her that there was no earthly aid for Barnacle Bill. From a hole directly above the heart welled the red blood, now slowly and sluggishly, as though conscious that its duties were forever at an end.

She put her hand upon the blood saturated garment, bent her ear to the broad chest, held the polished knife-blade to his lips; but alike without reviving hope.

"The poor fellow is dead!" she said, arising, her face white, her blanched lips quivering with strong emotion.

"And we killed him!" gasped Pet Flamsteed, her voice broken with sobs. "Only for us he would be alive and well! We murdered him, if ever man was murdered!"

"Not you—your hands are clear," said Dashing Della, seeking to console the sorrowing woman. "You pleaded for him—you begged me to spare him and to set him at liberty, when he could have held his own against a score of such cowardly dogs as Jasper Quigley—Ha!" she exclaimed, the color flashing back into her face at the sound of that name. "What of him? Where is he—Jasper Quigley?"

"I do not know—do not care," dependently replied the little woman, still kneeling beside the body of Barnacle Bill. "He is gone—that is enough for me. Do not breathe his vile name in the presence of the hero whom he so foully murdered—Not whom we murdered, you and I!"

For one moment Dashing Della stood irresolute, at a loss what to do. She saw that Pet Flamsteed was hysterical from all that she had been called on to undergo, and rapidly growing worse instead of better. At all hazards she must be aroused from that state, and grasping her arms with gentle force, the blonde siren lifted the little woman to her feet, giving her a slight shake to arrest her attention as she spoke.

"He is dead, and nothing you can do or say will restore him to life. And while you are making yours if sick with this unavailing grief, your bitterest enemy may be escaping to do you still further injury. Would you give him a chance to spread that foul charge all over the land—to bring it before your proud father?"

The right chord was struck at last, and Pet Flamsteed, by a desperate effort, rallied her energies.

"He is dead—he went over there," with a shuddering glance toward the yawning canyon. "I heard his death-cry—I heard his fall—Merciful Father! I shall hear it while I live!" she shuddered, covering her face.

Dashing Della hastened to the edge of the canyon and peered over the escarpment. For a few moments the gloomy depths baffled her, but then a wild cry escaped her lips.

As she looked breathlessly into the dizzy depths, she caught the sound of a footstep behind her, and turning quickly, saw Pet Flamsteed, startled by her exclamation, coming toward her.

Rising swiftly, she grasped the little woman by the arm, as though she would prevent her from looking over, but if such was her inten-

tion, it was quickly abandoned. Instead, she contented herself with keeping a firm grasp on Pet's arm, lest she should grow dizzy from looking down the abyss.

"Look!" she muttered, pointing to a tree-top not quite half-way down the further side of the canyon. "There he is—he fell into that tree, and it kept him from being instantly dashed to atoms!"

Pet Flamsteed saw this, and she saw more—saw the same thing which had drawn that horrified cry from the paling lips of the blonde siren.

Hurled with tremendous power and force by the giant, Jasper Quigley would have struck the further side of the canyon wall, only for the bushy top of a pine tree, whose thick branches broke and arrested his fall. But the tree had taken root in a small crevice in the rock-wall, where its roots were cramped and stunted. The heavy shock of the falling body had shaken their frail hold, and now the weight of his carcass was slowly but surely tearing the roots from the crevice, for even as they looked, the two startled women saw small fragments of frost-eaten rock and particles of earth falling away and rattling down the wall to the ragged rocks with which the bottom of the canyon was lined. And they even fancied that they could see the tree-top bending over, inch by inch, slowly but terribly sure.

Keenly as they might look, neither could detect the least sign of life in the body which was all doubled up in a heap, as though all the bones had been broken by the fall.

"Though he deserved neither pity nor mercy while living, I am thankful for that," whispered Dashing Della, reading aright the look in the dark eyes which turned for a moment to hers. "It would be truly horrible were he condemned to see and feel—to see the death slowly creeping toward him, yet he unable to do aught to either avert or delay it!"

"It may be that he is still living—that he is not dead, but only stunned," murmured Pet Flamsteed, averting her gaze from the horribly fascinating spectacle. "Dead or alive it is our duty to save him from another fall, if it lies in our power."

Dashing Della looked at the speaker curiously, as though unable to comprehend such magnanimity toward one who had done all that lay in his power to torture and ruin her, but there was nothing of the hypocrite in those dark eyes which met her blue orbs so clearly, and she replied:

"Even were we certain that he lives—were he your dearest friend instead of bitterest enemy, we are powerless to aid him in any way. No mortal power can preserve him from falling to those rocks below, but there is something we can and must do."

"What is it?" asked the little woman, quickly. "Anything is better than staying here in idleness and watching for his fall—and I can not keep my eyes away! It is like what they tell of the fascinating powers of the rattlesnake!"

"I comprehend your feelings, for I experience the same," said Dashing Della, drawing Pet away from the verge of the abyss, fearing that she would be tempted to fling herself over.

"Now listen, and I will tell you what your words reminded me of. You can not blame me for listening when that villain spoke so loudly and coarsely. I could not help hearing what he threatened you with, and though I do not fully comprehend, I feel sure that he has some paper or something that it is very essential does not fall into other hands—at least hands of those who may not prove to be your true friends. Am I not right?"

"Yes," was the unhesitating reply. "I can raise my hand toward heaven and call the angels to bear witness that I am more sinned against than sinning, but if that man spoke the truth, then he has or had in his possession something proof that might doom me to the gallows!"

"I inferred as much from his speech," was the quiet response. "But it needed not your assertion to convince me of your innocence of such crime. Still, there may be others harder to convince, and so we must be the first to find what may be concealed about his person."

"But how can we get down?"

"Easily enough," was the ready reply. "I have been here before, and know of a pass by which we can reach the bottom, less than a mile below here. Over yonder is where he left his horse—I caught a glimpse of it while bound to that rock. It is a rough road, and you are wearied. You must ride."

Dashing Della waited for no reply, but hurried Pet past the spot where poor Barnacle Bill lay weltering in his blood, only pausing when the hidden horse of Jasper Quigley was reached. Almost lifting the little woman into the saddle, the fair gambler led the way at a rapid pace, soon reaching the narrow, winding trail which led down to the bottom of the canyon.

It was a lonely, dreary looking place, dark from its depth, still darker owing to the vines and evergreen shrubbery with which the rock-walls were clothed. Along the center ran a small stream, and in the shallow pools could be seen the trout as they flashed to and fro, disturbed by the unwonted presence of human beings.

The way was rough and devious, but the two women pressed on as fast as the natural difficulties would admit, though Pet Flamsteed grew still more faint and sick at heart as they neared the spot where they would find all that remained of Jasper Quigley—for surely the tree had given way beneath his weight, long ere this!

Suddenly Dashing Della checked the horse, at whose head she was walking, pointing ahead and upward as she ejaculated:

"Look! he is still there—the tree still holds firm!"

Following the direction of the indicating finger, Pet Flamsteed saw the tree-top and its ghastly burden—but only for an instant—then the tree suddenly yielded, its top bending, the body slipping off and shooting down—down!

With a gasping cry, Pet felt her senses fleeing, and only for the quick grasp of Della, she must have fallen to the rock.

With a strength that seemed lent by the emergency, Dashing Della bore her to the little stream hard by.

CHAPTER XV.

DOWN IN THE CANYON.

DASHING DELLA drew a long breath of relief as she saw that it was but a simple faint on the part of Pet Flamsteed, and gently laying her light form down on the ground by the margin of the little stream, arose and turned toward the spot where Jasper Quigley had taken that last frightful plunge down to the waiting rocks.

"If I can do the work, without troubling her, poor child, so much the better," muttered the fair gambler, hurrying forward. "It must be a horrible sight to gaze upon, and her strength has already been overtaken."

In truth it was a sickening object to gaze upon, though the reality proved not to be as terrible as Dashing Della had fancied it, for once more fate had intervened to save Jasper Quigley from what seemed certain annihilation.

Instead of falling upon the bare, ragged rocks, as the two women believed inevitable, the yielding of the pine tree being at right-angles with the trend of the canyon wall, it cast the helpless rascal in a gentle curve toward the further wall, where a dense mass of tangled vines and stunted shrubbery in a great measure broke the force of his fall.

Still, if not the shapeless mass of quivering blood and bones which Dashing Della alone expected to see, Jasper Quigley had not wholly escaped the reward he so richly deserved.

His tattered rags were stained with red blood. His arms and legs were doubled and twisted into awkward positions, impossible to be assumed where the bones remained sound. All in all, a more woeful object could hardly be conceived.

With a white, stern-set look around her mouth, and a burning light in her blue eyes that was not easy of interpretation, Dashing Della bent over the mangled remains for a moment then started back with a sharp exclamation that was almost an imprecation, her pale face flushing hotly, her eyes glowing as though filled with living fire.

"Not dead—still living! Does the devil still guard its own?"

A low moan that would have escaped a keen or more distant ear—a slight quivering of the remains that was different from the simple muscular agitation which was to be expected; that was all, but Dashing Della knew that they indicated life, that Jasper Quigley was still living, though this might be the last fluttering of his soul.

For a brief space the fair gambler recoiled, gazing at the shattered body with thundering aversion, but this did not last long. She was little troubled with nerves, as the sex understands the term, and once more she became the cool-witted, clear-brained woman of business.

"Bah!" she muttered in a tone of contempt for her momentary weakness. "don't be a fool at this stage of the game! Dead or alive that body must be searched, and I am better able to do it than that poor child."

A faint, wheezing moan escaped the lips of Jasper Quigley as Dashing Della dragged him out of the mass of vines and brush, where he could get at his pockets, but he gave no other evidence of life, and with remarkable composure, the fair gambler proceeded to search for the paper on which so much depended.

For a few moments this was unsuccessful, but then, as she drew a small package from a secret pocket in the unconscious man's undershirt, and hastily ran her eyes over the blood-soaked and blurred writing therein, a joyful cry escaped her lips.

So far, at least, the story told by Jasper Quigley was true: he was in possession of a paper signed by Martin Luther Wesley, denouncing his wife, Florence, as his murderer. And this was the document which Dashing Della held.

Her eyes flashed with hot indignation at these terrible words, and it was clear enough that the poor little woman had one friend whose belief in her innocence could not be shaken, let the proof against her be never so strong.

—a prolonged yell that caused the rocky hills to echo and ring again until a thousand demons seemed to have been awakened from their slumbers, then—

base as was the heart of the man who concocted the foul scheme!" she exclaimed, angrily frowning at the unconscious schemer. "She shall never see it—never know that it had an existence. I will destroy it, and tell her that the villain was lying from first to last—"

She paused abruptly, even while in the act of rending the blood-stained paper, for she now saw the mistake into which she had so nearly fallen.

"The poor child would never be convinced that it was all a lie. She would live in constant dread of the paper's turning up to condemn her, when least expected. No—better a keen pang now, and then a long rest from that haunting fear. She shall see the paper, read it, and then destroy it with her own hands. That will be the best, the surest way."

thrusting the document into her pocket, Dashing Della turned away from the spot where Jasper Quigley lay, caring little now how soon death might put an end to his sufferings, and turned back to where she had left Pet Flamsteed.

The little woman was just recovering from fainting fit, and looked eagerly but silently into the face of the fair gambler as she approached.

Without a word Dashing Della stooped and placed the document with its tell-tale blood-stains into her trembling hand, then turned away with a thoughtfulness that did her credit, nor did she turn again until Pet Flamsteed uttered her name.

"You found this on—on him? You have read it?"

"Yes, to both questions," was the swift reply. "But it was not through idle curiosity that I read it. I wished to make sure that the right paper had been found. You may not care to hear it, but I cannot help saying that I feel that that charge is as false as it is foul. I believe that Jasper Quigley forged it from heading to signature!"

Pet Flamsteed smiled faintly as she extended her hand, to have it warmly clasped between both of Dashing Della's, but the depth of woe in her dark eyes deepened rather than grew faded away as she said:

"I am grateful for your good opinion—more grateful than words can express, just now, for such staunch friends have proved very rare in my experience. Though even the worst of them all never dared to put their suspicions into plain words, their cold, suspicious stares and thinly-veiled innuendoes were even harder to bear, for there was no way of defending oneself against such."

"But all that is past, now. You hold the only thing that could possibly be brought against you—"

"How can I be sure of that? You know no what a very demon of cunning and malignancy Jasper Quigley has shown himself. He may have laid a score of traps for me, on the faint chance of my escaping from the blows he meant to deal in person. He may have some copies of this—"

"Forgeries of a forgery—"

Dashing Della stopped short as a strange look came into the face of the hunted girl-woman.

"You are wrong; this is no forgery, but a genuine document, with every word, every line written by the hand of my murdered husband," was the startling announcement. "Ay! genuine, yet false as hell itself! The charge of a half-insane man, but of one who fully believed in the truth of what he wrote, for he what his other faults might, Martin Wesley would not knowingly lie, to save his own soul!"

Abruptly ceasing, Pet Flamsteed bowed her head in her lap, her frail form shaken with tearless sobs.

"The merciless fiend!" grated Dashing Della, her fair face transfigured into that of an avenging goddess. "It was all his work—the foul scheming of Jasper Quigley! Thank Heaven that he did not find instant death—that he still lives to suffer—"

"Lives—Jasper Quigley still alive?" ejaculated Pet Flamsteed, springing to her feet, all signs of weakness gone.

"He was when I left him—alive, though unconscious—"

"Quick! take me to him!" panted the little woman, her voice hoarse and unnatural, a wild light in her eyes. "He must not die until he has confessed all! He must be made to clear me of this foul charge—to tell the truth, even though he dies with the last word still warm on his perjured lips!"

Dashing Della was on the point of telling her what a slender chance of Jasper Quigley ever speaking a rational word again, but beld her peace as she saw that Pet Flamsteed was in no fit mental condition now to listen to words of reason, and silently led the way back to where the evil wretch had met with such a fitting retribution. Her mind worked rapidly, and when the spot was reached, she gently but firmly restrained the half-crazed girl-woman, saying:

"Not you, unless you would destroy the last faint hope of learning the truth from his vile lips ere death forever seals them. Should he see and recognize you now, he would either die raving, hugging his revenge to his bosom, or else

expire in a spasm of remorse ere he could clear you."

She yielded far more readily than Dashing Della had dared hope, falling back, only uttering in a hoarse whisper:

"So he speaks, I care not how—but I must have the truth."

Dashing Della bent over the shattered form, finding the wretch still alive, though unconscious, and as she more fully comprehended the nature and extent of his injuries, she the more plainly saw to what a poor, frail hope the little woman was clinging. Each minute that he lived, was a marvel—if he ever spoke a lucid sentence again, it would be a miracle.

Still she could not dash that last hope into the dust of utter despair, and turning to the eager girl-woman, she said:

"He is unconscious, but he still lives. You must not hope too much, for he is terribly injured, and death may come to his relief at any moment—"

"Not until he has spoken—not until he has cleared my fair name before the whole world!" impetuously cried Pet, her eyes ablaze, her face that of one half-crazed.

For a moment Dashing Della stood irresolute, at a loss what to do or say, but then a sturdy common-sense came to her rescue, and she believed she saw a way out of the dilemma.

"There is one chance: the skill of a surgeon may restore him to consciousness, for a time, long enough for our purpose, perhaps. At any rate, it is the best we can do. If you could find your way to town and bring Dr. Watkins—"

"To find him dead, perhaps, on my return? No—you must go—pardon me, lady," she said, piteously, with a sense of shame at the rude sound of her speech. "I am half mad, and hardly know what I am saying. I meant if you would be so kind as to do me this service—"

The soft palm of the blonde siren gently touched her lips, cutting short the trembling speech.

"I will go, on this condition: that you do not touch him, do not speak to him unless you see that his consciousness has fully returned. It is for your own good that I make this proviso. I would not have you destroy what faint hope there yet remains of learning the whole truth from this wretch."

"I promise—I will be cool and calm, for no one else knows how much depends on his full confession. But go—hasten, or he may die ere you can return!"

Softly touching her warm lips to the cold and clammy brow of the little woman, and pressing a loaded revolver into her hand, Dashing Della mounted the horse which had followed them of its own accord, and rode down the canyon as rapidly as the nature of the difficult trail would permit, leaving Pet Flamsteed alone with the mangled wretch who had done his worst to blight her young life.

It was a long and terrible vigil—one that was never to be forgotten while she lived. At every gasping moan, she would start forward and bend over the mangled mass, hoping to find him with consciousness restored sufficiently to comprehend her pleadings, only to fall back again, with the old, sickening despair racking her heart and brain.

It seemed an age, though scarcely an hour had elapsed since the departure of Dashing Della, when Pet Flamsteed was startled by a sound from the heights above, and glancing up she beheld a human face, stained and streaked with blood, peering over the escarpment of the west wall.

"Back—fin up an' tail a-wigglin'—*waal* I ber-durned!"

A wild, choking cry escaped the ashen lips of the little woman at the sight of that face—the face of Barnacle Bill—of the man whom she believed dead! For the moment she felt that his ghost had come back to haunt her, so shaken was her mind, but those familiar words drove the mad fancy from her brain, and changed her cry of terror to one of heartfelt thanksgiving that reached the ears of the Wall-eyed Pike of the Peak, and by directing his goggle-eyes to where she crouched, called forth that emphatic ejaculation.

"Ef it ain't the annigeliferous niadam number two, call me a tappin' snorkle!" exclaimed Barnacle Bill, in a very life-like voice, his pop-eyes protruding further than ever. "Did ye fly down thar with your own wings, or just floated down on a cobweb? Kin old Wall-eye be of any sarvice? Ef so, shet your eyes, fer down I come, head-fo'most, like a hop-toad in a pud-muddle!"

"No—no!" cried Pet, motioning him back. "You will kill yourself—if you are still living—"

"You never see a gar-fish more livelier than me," laughed the giant, though his voice was faint and husky, very unlike his usual sonorous tones. "But mebbe it would make a ugly muss, and mebbe spile my Sunday-go-to-meetin's, so ef you kin play the sign-board fer once, an' tell me how to find some other way, reckon I'll try that instid."

In a few words as possible the little woman gave him the necessary directions to enable

him to find the trail by which she had entered the canyon.

"I'll just straddle my old mule, fer somehow my head feels bigger'n it would of if I bin wrastlin' with the toughest kind o' old budge for a month o' Sundays," said Barnacle Bill, with a parting wave of his hand, then disappearing from the view of Pet, whose eyes were streaming with tears of thankfulness that this rough diamond had in some miraculous manner escaped the death which until now she believed had claimed him.

For the time being she forgot Jasper Quigley, and rising, hastened down the canyon to meet Barnacle Bill. His rude conduct of a short time before was forgotten, and she only remembered his gallant rescue of her in which he had so nearly sacrificed his life. From a drunken boor, he was transformed into a hero, and at that moment Pet Flamsteed was perilously near to falling in love with the giant.

She reached the foot of the trail just as Barnacle Bill gained the top, mounted on a scraggy little mule, his feet almost dragging on the ground, his blood-stained face, his soiled clothes, his ragged, bristling hair and beard, making him an object far more fit for ridicule than romantic affection. But Pet Flamsteed had learned that under all this was hidden a heart of true gold, big as all out-doors, and her greeting was so warm that the poor giant blushed clear back of his ears.

"Thank heaven you are still living!" she exclaimed, taking one of his hairy paws in both of hers and pressing it to her lips before Barnacle Bill could draw it away. "Thank God that your death does not lie at my door, as I feared!"

"Now don't—don't ye, now, little gal—I mean annigeliferous madam," stammered the giant, turning pale and trembling like a leaf, with a furtive glance over his shoulder, as though meditating speedy flight. "You make me feel all over in spots, when you talk that-away! I acted the pizen fool, an' though it was bad whisky done it, that don't make me any the less to blame, an' I humbly ax your pardin fer it all."

"No—it was I that was foolish, to take alarm so easily and you made amends a thousand times over when you rescued me from what would have been certain death but for your gallant defense—and that after our shameful treatment—"

"Lord love ye, annigeliferous madam, it saved me a heap o' trouble, fer I was jest lookin' fer a barber, and now the job's done—an' mighty well done, too!" said Barnacle Bill, but there was a doleful echo in his tones as he rubbed his remnant of beard.

Further speech was cut short by the rapid rattle of iron-shod hoofs on the rocks above, and the next minute Dashing Della came into view, at the head of half a dozen horsemen.

Eagerly Pet Flamsteed looked for the well-known face of the surgeon, but it was not to be seen, and Dashing Della hurriedly explained. She had met these men before reaching Nugget Camp, and sending one man on to bring the doctor, she turned back with the others, for, though she did not say so then, she had no hopes of finding Jasper Quigley alive.

This much she said, then turned to Barnacle Bill, who had to undergo another short period of torture—for such indeed to him were the warm thanks and apologies which he was pelted with, greatly against his wish.

But Dashing Della was far more practical than Pet Flamsteed had shown herself, and remembered that only a short time before she had pronounced this man dead, with a bullet through his heart, and insisted on looking at the wound. Barnacle Bill yielded so far as letting one of the men do the inspecting, and great was the wonder when the bullet-hole directly over his heart was matched by another at his back. To all seeming that vital organ had been perforated by the missile, yet here the giant was, still alive and apparently but little the worse for wear!

It was fortunate, perhaps, that Dr. Watkins arrived at this juncture, and despite her anxiety to return to the aid of Jasper Quigley, Pet Flamsteed insisted on his first attending to the injuries of Barnacle Bill. Then it was found that the bullet, breaking a rib, had glanced around, emerging at the back, making a severe but not mortal wound. The terrible shock had caused a death-like syncope for the time being.

The surgeon refused to give his opinion of Quigley, but had a horse-litter formed, the mangled wretch placed in it, and then the little cavalcade started for Nugget Camp. Contrary to all expectations, the man lived to reach town.

CHAPTER XVI.

REVOLVER ROB IN HIS GLORY.

FOR the last hour or two the level stretch of ground which bounded Nugget Camp on the east had echoed with the rapidly succeeding reports of fire-arms, until it seemed as though a constant succession of duels were being fought, but an investigation would have proved that,

thus far, at least, no blood had been spilled nor hard feelings engendered by that liberal burning of powder.

For some days past there had been much talk and bantering going on between two of the "first citizens" as to their respective skill with rifles and revolvers, and at length a regular match was made for "big money," which had just been decided.

With the match proper we have nothing to do, for interesting as it proved to be to the rival marksmen and their enthusiastic backers, still more interesting events grew out of it, events which would never be forgotten while Nugget Camp adorned the Footstool.

It will be remembered that Dashing Della, before parting with Revolver Robinson on the night before, promised to meet him that forenoon at the shooting-match, and at the time she fully intended to keep her word, but unforeseen circumstances prevented her from keeping the appointment, though Revolver Rob was there promptly on time.

His handsome face bore not the slightest trace of the terrible ordeal which he had been forced to undergo on the night just past. His dark eyes were clear and calm, his nerves steady and unshaken.

After that soul sickening vision faded away, he lost all consciousness, awaking only when the sun was shining brightly into his room, and the first sound that escaped his lips was a light laugh at that fantastic dream—for such he now firmly believed it to be. And by the time his breakfast was eaten the entire affair had faded from his mind.

"Not so bad, gentlemen," said the noted desperado, blowing rings of blue smoke into the balmy air, and giving his opinion only when it was asked. "Not so bad, considering the fact that you have made a practice of shooting only for fun or money. But it would hardly answer where every shot was worth a life. Where a miss was equivalent to death, and the loss of even the tenth part of a second in securing the drop might make all the difference between victory and defeat—and that where a man was never defeated but the once."

"In the good old days o' 'Forty-nine!" sighed a ragged specimen of the California "hard-shell."

"Or them o' 'Fifty-nine, when Cherry Crick was on a bender an' everything smelled o' Pike's Peak or bust!" chimed in a gray old "barnacle" of Colorado's youthful days.

"Exactly; or later still, when Quantrell, Todd, Anderson, the James and Younger brothers, with a score of others, none the less daring and doing, were fighting against fate and a countless horde of boys in blue—But those days are dead and gone, and few of you here know aught concerning them," the desperado said, turning away, a dark frown wrinkling his brows.

For a few moments there was utter silence, for all could see that dark memories were troubling the speaker, and none there cared to run the risk of waking the sleeping tiger.

With a short laugh and quick toss of his head, Revolver Rob solved the difficulty.

"If you like, gentlemen, I will try and show you how we shot in those days, though I was but one of the rank and file among those Pistol Princes, only a novice among masters."

A wild cheer arose, but Revolver Rob paid no attention to it. His eyes were aglow, a strange look rested upon his white face. Few if any of those present had ever seen him so completely transformed—from the cool, smiling, courtly card-sharp into the reckless daredevil, a smoldering human volcano which seemed on the point of breaking forth and scattering death and destruction on every side. His careless, languid grace had vanished. Instead, his movements were swift and energetic as those of a hungry tiger.

He stripped off his broadcloth coat and white vest, tossing them, with his hat, aside in a heap. He tied a silk handkerchief tightly around his forehead, suffering the ends to float loosely down behind. He crooked one finger in his mouth and whistled sharply, a clear neigh answering him as a clean-built, long-bodied bay stallion trotted up to his side through the crowd, the same horse which he had ridden out from town, pausing only when its velvet muzzle touched the cheek of its loved master.

With a single motion Revolver Rob was in the saddle, and then the old guerrilla and bushwhacker shone forth in every feature, in every line of his glowing countenance, his flashing eyes, his lithe figure. And the noble horse seemed to fully enter into the wild spirit of its master.

Here, there, everywhere they dashed, darted, dodged and leaped, the rider now in the saddle, now on the ground running beside the horse, their motions so swift and erratic that the human eye could scarcely follow them. A truly wonderful display of skill and adroitness, but this was only preliminary—only the "warming up."

Abruptly the stallion came to a halt, and as Revolver Rob drew the pistols from his belt, his keen eyes roved swiftly around. A moment sufficed, then he spoke, his voice cool and steady

as though the fast and furious exercise had only served to steady his nerves:

"Gentlemen, I'm afraid you'll have to fall back a little, or else get ready to dodge glancing lead, for I am going to show you how Quantrell's boys used to girdle the trees on their farms when the boys in blue were tired of hunting them—or of being hunted in turn," and he pointed to a slender pine tree which stood alone on the level a few rods away.

There was a general "scatteration," though all were curious enough to witness some of the marvelous feats which had been whispered concerning the noted desperado, and they only sought the nearest cover.

At a word the bay stallion darted forward, running low and level, its motions as easy and far more smooth than that of a rocking-chair, circling around the sapling indicated, at a distance of a dozen yards or more.

Abruptly a wild yell—the "charging cry" of Quantrell's men, which none who heard will ever forget—burst from the lips of the horseman, and then his revolvers began to speak, in such swift succession that the dozen reports were blended in one long roll. The sapling quivered, the bark flew like the dust from a circular saw in motion; then Revolver Rob drew rein and coolly recharged his weapons, while the crowd rushed forward and surrounded the tree, their amazement finding vent in ejaculations of wonder as they viewed the work of that rapid fusillade, for true as though done by machinery the sapling was girdled, each succeeding bullet taking up the work where the preceding one had left off, not one of the missiles burying itself in the wood, yet not leaving the slightest fiber of bark on the line unsevered.

Revolver Rob laughed softly, but with an undisguised sneer in his voice as he listened to these wondering exclamations. To them it was so marvelous, to him it seemed so simple. And mockingly he cried:

"Spare your breath, gentlemen, or you will have none left for use when I settle fairly down to business."

Cast a quick glance around, Revolver Robinson rode up to a man standing near, and addressed him:

"I believe you always carry the tools of your craft with you, Faro Phil; oblige me with a few cards, please."

A pack was instantly produced, and taking half a dozen of those lying uppermost, Revolver Rob rode slowly away toward a number of scattered trees, selecting two from the rest with some care, which stood nearly two-score yards apart, the space between and for several rods beyond being perfectly smooth and free from undergrowth or other obstructions.

Still keeping the saddle, he fastened a card on each of the trees, facing each other, level with his breast as he rode. Then he put two others on each tree, but one-fourth of the way around the trunks, so that they would be brought into full view of any one riding between and past the trees.

Riding back to where the crowd was watching his movements with interest, he said, lightly:

"No danger of glancing bullets this bout, gentlemen, so choose your own stations, just so you keep the passage between those two trees open for me."

After the astonishing degree of skill which he had already displayed, the simple word of Revolver Rob was accepted without the slightest doubt, one and all breathlessly watching the result as he once more started his horse in that steady run, wheeling and riding down midway between the two trees, each hand holding a cocked revolver with the muzzles upward until fairly abreast the trees, when out shot his arms with the swiftness of thought, the weapons exploding as it seemed without the slightest attempt at taking aim, yet at the double report each card fluttered to the ground amid a tiny shower of shattered bark.

Turning half around in the saddle as he swept past the trees, Revolver Robinson fired four more shots with marvelous rapidity, and no less astonishing success, for the bullet-pierced cards dropped from where they had been stuck, the fourth leaving its resting-place ere the first one touched the earth.

Without waiting to hear the comments on this performance, the Pistol Prince rode back, and while reloading his weapons, called six men by name from out the crowd, tossing them a handful of silver dollars.

"You know the trick, Baker," he added, addressing one of those who was well known to form one of his particular following. "Place your men, and if they require it, give them the necessary instructions."

"Puttin' your private stamp on them, eh? A co-rect, boss!" and signaling the others to follow him, Baker led the way out into the open ground, placing them in position and giving to each a single coin.

When all was in readiness, they stood in a double line, separated by a dozen yards or more, each man being the same distance from his nearest neighbor on the same side. Though all facing inward, no man was directly opposite any other, but the first on the left was stationed

to cover the vacant space between the first and second men on the right-hand side, and so on down the line.

"Ready, boys!" cried Revolver Robinson, his voice ringing out like a clarion, as he settled himself in the saddle. "Spin promptly when I call your numbers, or some of my lead may go astray—and the clumsy ones find it!"

There was more of earnest than jest in this speech, even though it was uttered with a sneer, and there was little danger of the men failing to perform their parts correctly.

A light touch of the spur sent the bay stallion forward, and as he neared the first man, the voice of Revolver Robinson rung out clear and sharp. Up spun the coin, and as swiftly was it followed by the gleaming weapon. Spitefully rung the pistol—the dollar vanished with a shrill hum that was blended with the still sharper whistle of the battered lead, both distinctly audible even above the second report. In rapid succession Revolver Robinson called out the numbers, the whirling coins gleamed as they spun into the air, the pistol cracked as the rider flashed his weapon first to the right, then to the left and back again, so rapidly that the eyes of the spectators could scarcely follow the motions, while the peculiar whistle and hum of battered coins and ragged bullets told with what marvelous precision each shot was directed.

All eyes saw the six coins rise into the air, but no one beheld their return to earth, though one of the men on the outskirts of the crowd uttered a sharp cry and staggered as though on receipt of a severe blow. A moment later that cry was altered to a yell of exultation, as he held up one of the silver dollars, now bent into a rude crescent from having received a glancing hit from one of the bullets.

Wheeling his horse, Revolver Robinson rode slowly back to the crowd, his dark eyes aglow, a proud smile curving his red lips, for the first time suffering himself to show that the enthusiastic applause of the crowd was agreeable to him.

"That's a fair sample of how we shot while riding with Quantrell in the 'Sixties, gentlemen. How do you like it?"

The yells, cheers, unstinted praise and extravagant compliments which followed were enough to satisfy the most vain, and the handsome desperado received them one and all with a careless grace peculiarly his own, finally raising his hand as though to command silence; but ere the words could leave his lips, a cold, cutting voice made itself heard:

"Passably well done for trick-shooting, but only trick-shooting, after all—not the genuine science of marksmanship!"

All eyes were turned in the direction of the voice, and the daring speaker was the observed of all observers. There was little difficulty in locating him, for he stood apart from the crowd, and coolly nodded as those wondering looks were cast upon him, thus frankly fathering the remark.

Tall, athletic and well built. Plainly yet well dressed in somber black, the long coat buttoning closely to the throat, only a narrow border of white being visible at his wrists. A heavy, full beard of black, his complexion deeply bronzed, his eyes small, deep-set and brilliant as those of an angry rattlesnake.

Such was the personal appearance of the man whose bold and sneering speech seemed like a loaded shell cast into the camp of a sleeping enemy.

Revolver Robinson was the first to face the speaker, his countenance flushing hotly for a moment, then turning white as that of a dead man; but not from fear. Into his eyes came the cold, icy glitter that few men could encounter without flinching, and there was an ominous echo in his voice as he addressed the bold stranger:

"From the way you speak, my dear sir, one would think you held yourself competent to give me lessons in the art of shooting. Is that what you mean to hint?"

"I never give or take hints," was the quiet retort.

"In plain words, then, can you teach me anything?"

"Perhaps. I am willing to try, provided you make it an object worth the trouble."

"What do you call an object?"

"Gold or its equivalent."

"In the shape of a gift, of course, to be yours whether you succeed or not?" laughed Revolver Robinson, sneeringly.

The stranger laughed softly, with a light motion of his hand, as though brushing the insolent remark aside.

"My dear sir, if the strain be not too great for your nerves, let us talk like gentlemen. You are proud of your supposed skill as a marksman. As a trick-shooter, I admit that you are payable in a common crowd, yet among true artists of the trigger you would have to take a back seat."

"In other words, you think you can beat me?"

"Think is only indefinite, my dear sir; know is definite."

"Talk is cheap, but it takes money to back it."

land. I've got a thousand dollars that say you can't make your word good."

"The lesson will be worth double that amount to you, if only in curbing your sublime self-conceit," was the cool retort. "Say two thousand, put up your money in some responsible man's hands, and I will cheerfully accommodate you."

Before Revolver Robinson could utter a word in reply, two-score hands were in the air, each one grasping gold or bank-notes, and as many voices eagerly begging him to take their money as a portion of the wager. But a sharp gesture on his part quickly silenced them.

"Thanks, gentlemen, but I risk no man's money save my own."

The stranger laughed softly, then called out:

"I will cheerfully accommodate such of you as have any loose change to invest, as soon as the preliminaries are settled, gentlemen. Rest easy; your money shall not go begging."

Where both parties were so eager for the test, but little time was cut to waste in selecting a stakeholder and posting the amount of the wager. Then the stranger glanced keenly through the crowd, and finally singled out one of them, saying:

"Though you are a stranger to me, sir, your face is sufficient recommendation. Will you oblige me by taking any and all bets that may be offered against my winning the money up? Or—pardon me!—you may have your sympathies enlisted on the other side?"

"Not a bit of it!" was the swift reply. "I've got a few ducats I want to lay out in the same way."

The man thus selected was none other than Sandy Lithgow, one of the League of Six, and known as Number Four. Was that choice pure chance, or was there more in this sudden opposition to the man whom the League had vowed to hunt down to death than appeared on the surface?

Sandy Lithgow was quickly surrounded by a score of excited men, each one eager to invest his money before the purse of the stranger should be exhausted by the demands upon it; but their fears seemed wholly without foundation, for each and every offer at even money was accepted and covered at once with notes from the fat pocket-book.

Revolver Robinson paid little attention to this, being busy in cutting a five-pointed star out of white paper, which, when done, he gave to one of his adherents, bidding him tack it on a tree and measure off thirty paces.

"As the challenged party, I believe it is my privilege to name the first test," he said, addressing the stranger, who carelessly nodded his assent. "I will just set you a little example, and if you can copy it, then you can take your turn."

Going to the score, Revolver Robinson nodded to the man, who counted six at intervals of a few seconds, the marksman firing at the word. At the last shot the star fell to the ground, and turning to the stranger, Revolver Robinson said:

"To prevent any chance of dispute, perhaps you will be so obliging as to bring in that bit of paper for inspection?"

CHAPTER XVII.

A BOLD KNIGHT OF THE TRIGGER.

WITH an easy step and cynical smile the cool stranger advanced and picking up the paper without more than a casual glance at it, returned and placed it in the hands of the man chosen as stakeholder, Long John Wilkinson.

Even that cool and iron-nerved sport could not refrain from expressing his wonder aloud, for as he held up the paper star, all could see that each one of the five points were clipped off, while the sixth shot had struck so near the center as to cut out the tack which held it to the tree.

Long and enthusiastic were the cheers of those who had wagered their money on Revolver Robinson, but through it all the stranger stood with that cold, sneering smile curling his mustaches, that mocking light in his eyes.

Revolver Rob saw this, and it evidently stung him, despite the perfect control under which he usually held his emotions.

"There is your pattern, sir; duplicate it, and the money is yours," he said, his eyes glittering with a dangerous light which was by no means lessened as the stranger laughed softly.

"I expected something more from a trigger-knight of your widely extended reputation; something beyond the common run of workmanship—"

"Equal that bit, and then talk," was the short reply.

"Very well. Only no more child's play. I have traveled two thousand miles to test your skill, but I do not care to spend a week in by-play before coming to the point."

"I don't know what your name is—"

"You may call me Captain Nemesis, for the present," was the swift interjection.

Sandy Lithgow interchanged glances with the other men who stood near him; the only four who had dared to place a dollar on the stranger against Revolver Rob—the four who had been enlisted in a death hunt by a marked man who gave them this same ominous title.

Were the chief of the avengers and the man whom he had sworn to kill, face to face thus early in the game?

"As I was about to remark, Captain Nemesis," continued Revolver Rob, uttering the title as though the most common-place name had been given him, "it is easier to talk than to perform. You may be all that you pretend in the way of shooting, but as a professional betting man, it is a rule of mine to put my money freely against any one who makes too big brags before showing any foundation for them."

"And my rule is to accommodate all such customers. Name your figures, my dear sir."

"Shall we double the stakes that you do not duplicate the example I have set for you?"

"With the greatest of pleasure," was the prompt reply, and as quickly as it could be counted, the amount was placed in the hands of the original stakeholder.

This cool confidence on the part of Captain Nemesis deterred the crowd from offering any further bets, and anxiously they awaited the result.

Little time was cut to waste. At the request of his adversary, Revolver Robinson cut out another star, exactly the same size and shape of the other, and when it was tacked to the tree, he added:

"Will you be so kind as to give the word for me? This style of shooting is not what I have practiced—"

"Shoot as you prefer. There was nothing mentioned about firing at the word. I ask for no advantage over you. I choose my favorite style, and you have the same privilege, of course."

"Doubtless; but I prefer to beat—or equal, since your target is perfect of the kind—you at your own choice."

Again the face of the noted desperado flushed hotly, but he made no reply, nor spoke again until Captain Nemesis was at the score, pistol in hand.

Steadily he counted, and promptly the weapon rose and exploded at each number. And a gasping breath ran through the assembly as the paper fluttered and dropped to the earth as the sixth shot echoed on the air.

Revolver Rob did not wait to be asked, but strode to the tree and picked up the target. Unlike the other, also, he paused for a moment to examine the paper, and his face was white and hard-set as he returned and handed the mutilated star to Long John Wilkinson.

"Make a secret mark on the last star, and after mixing them up, hand them back to Mr. Robinson," said Captain Nemesis, quietly. "If he can indicate the one I shot at, then the stakes belong to him."

"No—I give in," was the hoarse reply of the desperado. "The target is perfect. The money is yours!"

An angry yell arose from those who had placed their money upon Revolver Robinson, and one of the boldest advanced.

"We protest!" he cried, hotly. "When our bets were made, the understanding was that it was won and lost only when one of you two was beaten, fairly and squarely, not that he should simply equal your pattern!"

"That's so! It ain't beat—only tied!"

All the blood in his body seemed to fly to the face of Revolver Rob as these cries broke forth, and his pistols covered the foremost of the objectors as he thundered:

"I said that if he equaled my pattern, he won. Dare to kick, you hounds, and you shall settle with me!"

Bloodshed appeared inevitable, but Captain Nemesis swiftly leaped before the leveled pistols of Revolver Rob, though with his back toward them, facing the excited crowd.

"Peace, gentlemen, you are wasting your breath for nothing. No man can say that I ever accepted a dollar that I did not first earn fairly and squarely. I agreed to beat Mr. Robinson at his own game, and until I do so so plainly and decisively that the most captious among you all is forced to admit as much, your money is neither lost nor won."

Never was a speech of equal length more enthusiastically received, never an unpopular man grew into general favor so quickly; but stilling the wild yells, Captain Nemesis turned to his rival, smiling suavely.

"I beg your pardon, my dear sir, for interfering, but for good and sufficient reasons, which you may possibly learn ere we call quits, I must respectfully but positively decline to accept any favor from your hands. As all bets go with the stakes that money must stand until fairly won and lost."

"As you insist upon it, let it be so," was the cold response. "It is your turn now. All I ask is that you make it short and sharp."

Captain Nemesis laughed, softly, mellowly.

"My dear sir, I never was in a hurry in my life, and I am too old to begin to change my habits now. We have the whole afternoon before us, and besides," his voice suddenly growing sharp and metallic, "it is my purpose to test something more than your skill as a marks-

Revolver Robinson stared at the bold speaker half in anger, half in doubt, but those black

eyes met his without flinching, and that hard-set face baffled him as completely.

"You seem inclined to talk in riddles, Captain Nemesis," he uttered, coldly, but with an ugly light in his eyes that warned him who knew him best of breakers ahead.

"Two to one that the little circus winds up with a funeral!" muttered Long John Wilkinson in the ear of an associate, who shook his head dubiously before answering:

"Double the odds that Revolver Rob bowls him out without getting plugged himself, and I'll take you."

It was the turn of the keen-sighted gambler to shake his head, for there was something in the cool daring and even insolence shown by this dark stranger toward one so noted and widely known as "a bad man," that told that he was no novice in the game where pistols were trumps, and consequently not a safe man to lay odds against in a case of this sort. And besides this, there was something unnatural about the looks and actions of Revolver Robinson himself. Never before had he been known to endure so much without powder being burned in deadly earnest. Could it be that he felt that at last he had met his master? Or had this dark stranger cast a spell over him—to "hoo-doo" the desperado?

"If so, they are riddles which I am perfectly willing to solve for you, my dear sir," returned Captain Nemesis, stifling a yawn with one hand, then adding languidly:

"I do not deny that you are a fair shot—a good one, for that matter, where all is plain sailing and you are at liberty to carry things according to your own liking—but I do deny that you have the nerve which all true pistol-shots possess—"

A hard mocking laugh cut his words short.

"Indeed! But are you not rather begging the question?"

"Not in the least. Your reputation as a phenomenal pistol-shot has spread over the whole country, and the great majority of men seem to think that such another, much less a superior, has not yet seen the light of day. In that I differ from them. Without wishing to boast, or blow my own horn, as the vulgar hath it, I believe that I am your master in this as well as every other respect that constitutes a man—"

"There is a shorter and surer way to settle that—"

"Pardon me, my dear sir, but I have not quite finished what I was saying," Captain Nemesis uttered with a cool insolence that drove the hot blood from the face of the desperado. "Permit me to have my say out, then I will be ready to hear what you may have to offer."

Revolver Bob turned abruptly away, as though fearing to trust himself, but the low, mocking laugh with which the cool stranger greeted this movement, caused him to turn quickly.

"Still another proof that my claim is well founded. As long as you suffer your nerves to be so easily shaken, just so long will you lack the one great essential of a genuine pistol-shot, just so long will I, among others, be your master."

"Have you finished?" hoarsely demanded the desperado.

"Not quite. As I remarked, you are a respectable shot, so long as nothing occurs to ruffle your temper and shake your nerves, but you do not deserve the wide reputation you have won. Ask yourself, and answer candidly: at this very moment are you fit to shoot for your life? Are not your nerves all unstrung?"

With an angry snarl Revolver Robinson cut him short.

"Say no more! Nerves or no nerves, I can out-shoot you for money or for blood—"

"We will talk about the first, just now," was the cool interposition. "Time enough for the other when I have proven my assertion. I have a little wealth here—"

"How much?"

"Ten thousand."

Revolver Robinson turned abruptly toward Harvey Miller, ostensible owner of the Oasis saloon and gambling room.

"Take my horse and ride to town. Bring back the amount he mentions with you. Make haste, for I am growing sick of this talk-talk and no cider!"

A short, mocking laugh broke from the stranger as Miller leaped into the saddle and rode swiftly toward Nugget Camp.

"You will feel worse before you are better. But to end what I was saying: You are a fair target-shot, but when faced by a man, I believe you will prove an arrant coward!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

A SHOT FOR A LIFE.

FOR a single instant following those dangerous words, the astonished crowd stood spell-bound, but then, expecting nothing else than that lead would begin to fly in deadly earnest, their close-drawn ranks divided and rolled back on either side, leaving a clear lane behind the two knights of the trigger. And for a brief space it did

seem as though a tragedy must follow without delay, for Revolver Robinson drew his weapon with lightning swiftness and covered the bold speaker. But Captain Nemesis stood with folded arms, a cynical smile on his hard-set features.

"Shoot and prove my words true, why don't you?" he sneered, and there were those present who firmly believed that he was taking the only course that could possibly save him from instant death. "Ordinarily you are a brave enough man when the odds are all in your favor—when you are fully armed and covering an empty-handed man: then why hesitate now?"

As by magic the hot rage vanished from the face of the desperado, and he lowered his weapon.

"Whatever I may lack, you show decided nerve, Captain Nemesis!" he exclaimed, with a short laugh. "However, I hope to still more thoroughly test it, after our little wager is decided."

"It will be too late if you wait until then, my dear sir."

"What do you mean by that?" sharply demanded Revolver Robinson. "No man ever dared to call me a coward before this nor shall you have a chance to boast of having done so, after this day is ended, for if you refuse to fight me, then I swear to shoot you like a dog!"

"You misunderstood me, my dear sir, or perhaps I did not make my meaning sufficiently plain," was the cool response. "In saying that it would be too late then to test either my nerve or yours, I meant that you or I, or both, would be dead."

For a moment Revolver Rob stared at the speaker as if at a loss to comprehend his full meaning, even yet, but then a blazing light leaped into his eyes, and he cried eagerly:

"Then the test you propose is a duel?"

"Precisely. You can gauge neither a man's skill nor his courage, much less his nerves, by firing at an inanimate target. The only fair test is to stand him opposite another whom he knows is not a bungler with the tools, for him to know beyond all doubt that he must kill or be killed."

"I am delighted to hear that you mean business, for as a general thing, when a man is as fond of hearing his own voice as you appear to be, he is not apt to take any pleasure in listening to the crack of a revolver, when fired in earnest. Had you spoken to the point at first, one or the other of us might have been half-way to glory by this time!"

"Time enough for you to make the trip yet before daylight fails you, my dear fellow. Besides, I prefer waiting until I see the stakes put up before I work for them."

"That will not delay us long, for yonder comes my man."

"Good enough! But I don't feel as though I had wasted my time altogether, since I have made the discovery I anticipated—that you not only have nerves, but that they are *your* master!"

Revolver Robinson said nothing in reply, for at that moment his messenger returned and handed him a compact packet of bank-notes, which were rapidly counted and pronounced correct by Long John Wilkinson, and as promptly covered by Captain Nemesis, who seemed to be a walking bundle of money to the wondering and envious spectators, more than one of whom was secretly cursing their ill-luck at not having scented this big game before, when a knife-thrust or a pinch of powder rightly burned might have transferred the wealth far more easily than now bade fair to be the case.

"Now the money is up, talk business," bluntly exclaimed Revolver Rob. "You say that money is to be decided by a duel?"

"Precisely—but a duel a little out of the old rut. In the great majority of such, chance plays by far the most important part. In this, so far as mortal man can accomplish it, chance is to be eliminated, leaving all to skill and nerve."

"You are sure you have not mistaken your mission here on earth?" sneered Revolver Robinson. "You talk glib enough to be a preacher—"

"At least I hope to 'save' you for good and all before the sun sets," was the pointed retort, and the face of the desperado flushed hotly as a low laugh ran through the crowd at this decidedly neat hit.

"Name terms and conditions, and let's get to work. You're wasting time that might be better employed. I'm getting hungry and want my dinner."

"I'm betting that you will dine with your patron saint, the devil, if you dine at all this day."

A sudden and complete change came over Revolver Robinson. He seemed to realize that this audacious stranger was systematically working to irritate him and thus render his nerves less reliable, and he resolved to foil him in this respect as in all others.

Captain Nemesis appeared to read that change aright, for he dropped his bantering tone, and from a pack of cards which he borrowed from

one of the bystanders, he selected the ace of diamonds. This he tacked against the side of a tree, counting aloud his paces as he returned, making a mark in the sand with his heel as the first score was completed.

"There is your mark, Revolver Rob, and now for the conditions. We will toss for choice of shots, but each of us will fire once at that card. The one that makes the poorest shot will then stand at that tree, while the winner fires another shot, to wound, cripple, or kill according to his own sweet will."

"In other words, one of us is to commit suicide—for that is about what it amounts to!" ejaculated Revolver Rob.

"Does your nerve begin to fail you already?" sneered Captain Nemesis, a mocking light in his dark eyes.

"Try me and see," quietly retorted the desperado.

"In a moment; I have not finished what I wished to say. The man who loses his shot, will take his station as target wholly unarmed, and there receive one shot. Should he not be killed, or wholly disabled, then positions and conditions will be exactly reversed, and so on until one or both parties are unable to respond to the call of time."

"You are looking a good deal further ahead than there is any necessity for, my dear sir," said Revolver Rob, showing his white teeth in a diabolical smile. "I assure you that a single shot is all I expect to take ere the matter is ended."

"The shot at the card—exactly," bowed Captain Nemesis, with a smile. "That much I concede you."

"Your remarkable kindness is fully appreciated. But to business. Will you flip the coin, or shall I?"

"A few more words, first. I do not care to leave a single point open to possible dispute. We will each select a man as second. He will be given one revolver, with a single cartridge, which is not to be inserted until fate or skill has decided which man shall have the first shot at the other. It shall be the duty of the one seconding the losing man to see that this one cartridge alone is placed in the weapon, and that the winning party has no other weapons on his person."

Revolver Rob's eyes opened widely and his brows arched.

"You are particular! May I ask why all this caution?"

"Because *you* may win the first shot, and I do not care to risk a second one," was the swift reply.

Even this bitter insult was passed over by Revolver Rob, though his face turned a shade whiter, and the ugly light in his eyes grew still more intense. And those who knew him best felt that Captain Nemesis was digging a grave for himself with his cutting tongue.

A low, chilling laugh broke from the lips of the desperado, after a brief silence, and he said:

"You have said enough to seal your doom a thousand times over, my dear sir. But I will be merciful, and when it comes my turn to speak, I will utter but one word—and that in the shape of a bullet through your heart!"

"Win your laurels before you wear them, my friend. I believe we understand the matter fully, now. It only remains for us to select our seconds, and then toss for choice of shots."

"Miller, you will serve for me?" asked Revolver Robinson, turning to the man who ran the Oasis.

"With pleasure, and count it an honor," was the reply.

Captain Nemesis was more deliberate in his selection, running his gaze leisurely over the crowd, finally dwelling as he came to the dark, anxious face of Sandy Lithgow.

"As a stranger here, my choice is necessarily limited, and must be made at random, but as I have trusted my money in *your* hands, my friend, I will do the same with my life, if you will consent to serve me so far."

"That I will, an' say thank ye into the bargain!" was the prompt reply. "Ef thar's any skin-game tried on, it won't come to a head while Sandy Lithgow can pull trigger or han'le a knife—bet your sweet life on that!"

"Thanks! If I come out right side up, be sure you shall not be the loser by this kindness toward a stranger."

"Talk enough," gruffly interposed Revolver Robinson, at this juncture. "Will you toss, or shall I?"

"Just as you prefer; it is immaterial to me." "Flip, then, and I'll call. It will be a bit of poetical justice to make you aid so far in your own execution."

"If it gives you comfort, hug that delusion to your bosom while you may," laughed Captain Nemesis, producing a double-eagle from his pocket. "Stern reality will dawn upon you soon enough. Ready?" and as the word rung out sharply, he sent the golden coin whirling high into the air above their heads.

"Heads forever!" cried Revolver Robinson, promptly.

"But tails on this occasion!" and Captain Nemesis laughed mockingly as the rival knights

of the trigger bent over the fallen coin. "I sincerely trust you are not superstitious, my dear sir, and will not let this evil omen unsteady your nerves."

"If I am superstitious, my belief goes no further than that first winner is generally last loser. Take your choice: will you shoot first, or shall I?"

"Age before beauty, always. Set me the pattern, my dear sir, for I am bound that you shall be first in everything, to-day—first to shoot, first to stand a shot, and above all else, first to cross the range with your boots on!"

Every word, every look, every motion since they first became antagonists, of Captain Nemesis was carefully calculated to irritate his rival and, if such a thing was possible, to unsteady his nerves. At first it seemed as though his object would be gained, but now Revolver Rob was fully on his guard, and gave not the slightest sign of being touched by the barbed shafts.

Quietly moving to the score which Captain Nemesis had marked out, he carefully selected a cartridge, making sure that the conical ball was perfectly true, that both chamber and barrel of the weapon were clean as the brush and swab could make them. But this done, he wasted no further time.

Swift as thought his weapon rose and exploded.

"Hang-fire, by the 'Tarnal!" cried a voice in wild dismay.

CHAPTER XIX.

STARING DEATH IN THE FACE.

It was only too true!

Between the falling of the hammer and the explosion of the cartridge, there was a period so brief as to be perceptible only to the keenest of ears, but still enough to make all the difference between winning and losing—between life and death when, as in this case, so much hung in the balance with the rivals so evenly matched as regards skill.

To a skillful shot of the more common style—that is one who covers the target and dwells on his aim for an instant before firing—the mishap would not have been so serious, because the weapon would have spoken before the aim was affected, but with one like Revolver Robinson, who was a "snap-shot," pure and simple, swiftly raising his pistol in a straight line with the mark and pulling trigger the instant his sights touch the lower edge of the target, without checking the weapon at all until after the lead speeds on its mission, the case was altogether different, for in that scarcely perceptible period of time, the weapon was raised a hair's breadth—enough to spoil the shot.

At a glance the excited spectators saw that the card still held its position against the tree, and then they saw that while the red spot in the center was intact, the dark round spot where the bullet had entered showed just above the upper point of the diamond.

"A fair line-shot, but not one on which I would care to rest either my reputation or my life, with a marksman to follow," said Captain Nemesis, with an ugly, blood-chilling laugh.

Not a line of the desperado's countenance altered, and his voice was as steady as ever when he made reply:

"Such as it is, it remains for you to beat it before you make your brags."

This cool, unmoved bearing seemed to have its effect on the stranger, for his tone softened as he said:

"I was wrong to say that, and I frankly beg your pardon, Mr. Robinson. Though I came many miles and have spent more years than I care to admit, for the express purpose of killing you, after a fair and manly fashion, I am loth to give any one the chance to say that only for an accident which was wholly beyond your control, the results might have been reversed. I saw that your weapon hung fire, and admit that only for its doing so, you would have blotted that diamond out of existence. I now ask you to take another shot—"

"Stop!" sternly cried Revolver Rob, his eyes all aglow. "After all that you have said—after all the taunts and bitter insults you have showered upon me—I would die a thousand deaths rather than accept even the shadow of a favor from your hands! I have borne with your insolence as not one man in a hundred would have done, simply because you put forward the plea of being a stranger, surrounded by my friends, and hinting that you did not expect to receive any thing like fair play. But though I bore them so quietly, I have noted down each and every insult, and I say to you now that one or the other of us only quits this ground as a dead man!"

"You will be that one, then!" sneered Captain Nemesis.

"That remains to be seen, but bear this in mind; dare to even hint at the offer you just made, and I swear to break every bone in your body!"

"And while you make the attempt, I'll be keeping the flies off of you," laughed the other, significantly, then abruptly changing his tone, he added, "I was a fool for making the offer, for I know full well that you would never do so, were the case reversed."

"Be sure I would not—nor would you, had you not felt confident that the offer would be rejected as soon as made. I play to win, and so do you, though you hoped to make a little capital with the crowd. You have said a good deal about my nerves; take your stand and see if yours are equal to the pattern I have set you."

Captain Nemesis made no reply. There was an ominous murmur running through the crowd that warned him he was rapidly losing the ground he had gained at the expense of his rival, only the four members of the league showing any signs of satisfaction at the dark outlook for Revolver Robinson.

Striding to the score, he inspected his weapon, much as his rival had done before him, and when satisfied that all was in perfect order, he turned his right side toward the target, raising his weapon slowly and steadily. Either he had taken warning by the mishap which befell Revolver Robinson, or else his customary style of shooting was radically different from that which he had shown when firing at the star. That was word-firing, or snap shooting, while this, in contra-distinction, may be styled level-shooting.

As the polished tube reached its level, it paused and remained motionless while one might have counted three without haste, then exploded.

The card turned part way around, hung thus for an instant, then fell fluttering to the ground.

A sound that was almost a groan in its deep intensity burst from the breathless crowd, then there was a general rush toward the fallen target, but Captain Nemesis whipped forth a revolver and leaped before them, shouting:

"Back! you fellows—back, I say! or I'll block up the road with some of your carcasses! Let Mr. Robinson go and get the card alone. There must not be the slightest foundation for foul play being called this turn!"

This swift speech, backed up as it was by a revolver in the hands of such a dead-shot, produced the desired effect, and the crowd fell back, leaving Revolver Rob to advance alone.

He stooped for the card, cast one glance at it, then calmly returned and held it above his head, where all could see.

All save the four points of the red diamond was obliterated. The center was cut out as truly as though the circle had first been traced with a compass.

In a voice which even the keen ears of his enemies could detect not the faintest shade of anything like either chagrin or fear, Revolver Robinson addressed Captain Nemesis:

"I acknowledge my defeat. The money staked is yours."

"And the life?" swiftly demanded the stranger, his eyes filled with a savage glitter that spoke even plainer of deadly hatred than his words. "The money was put up only as a sort of make weight. Your life was the stake I was playing for mainly!"

"The life is yours, if you can take it in accordance with the rules laid down awhile ago," was the cold response. "But be not too sure—your nerves may fail you this time!"

Captain Nemesis laughed exultantly, mockingly.

"Huz that vain delusion to your bosom if it gives you any consolation, my dear sir. Once I offered you another chance for your life, but you flatly, not to say ungratefully, refused to accept it. Be sure I shall not offend in a like manner again. Your doom is sealed, Revolver Robinson, so completely that not all heaven and earth can save your life now!"

"Don't be too sure," carelessly retorted Revolver Robinson, biting the end off of and lighting a fresh cigar. "I've seen sicker dogs than this get well and come out top of the heap in the end."

"You may prove to be that dog, but I doubt it. Unless you have something very particular to say—some message to leave for absent friends, some final prayer or last will and testament to make—take your stand by yonder tree and pay the penalty of biting off more than you can chew."

"One word first," said Revolver Robinson, cutting the mocking speech short with an impatient wave of his hand. "You have repeatedly insulted me, knowing that my hands were tied, as it were. But I overlook all that, and will show you that I am more of a man than you dare pretend to be."

"You have won a shot at me, and barring accident, you are tolerably certain of killing me. I have only to hold my peace, and my death would be avenged before the echo of your shot could die away. My friends here would rid me with bullets, ere you could lower the weapon that dealt me death, or turn the muzzle upon them."

"But not in time to save you! Even in dying I would eat you down, be sure of that!" was the sardonic interjection.

Revolver Robinson made him no reply, but turned to the excited crowd, putting a stern emphasis on every word as he addressed them.

fate decides against me, and any man of you all dares to offer harm to this gentleman on that account, to lift hand or weapon against him before he commits some crime or sin against you, then I solemnly swear that I will come back and haunt you—I swear to avenge him, even though I have to burst asunder the very locks of Satan's stronghold to make my vow good!

"You know me, and know that I never yet broke a pledge to either friend or foe. Give me the promise that I ask. No matter what befalls me, so long as it is regular, you will suffer this gentleman to go his way unharmed."

All the more readily, perhaps, because they remembered how inuring was the aim of the dark stranger, the required pledge was given, and without another glance at Captain Nemesis, Revolver Robinson walked to the tree, standing proudly erect, his arms folded so low that his swelling bosom was fully exposed, his face calm and smiling, his eyes beaming as gently as those of a woman.

"Take your pound of flesh, Captain Nemesis," he cried, in a voice clear and mellow as the tones of a silver bell. "Take your shot, and send it truly home, for if you miss, or fail to kill instantly, be sure my next cartridge will not be likely to hang fire!"

Promptly the stranger took his position at the score, and closely watched by the crowd in general and Revolver Rob's second in particular, Sandy Lithgow placed the one cartridge in the revolver before handing it to the successful duelist. This done, he was searched for other weapons, and the seconds fell back, leaving the rivals facing each other.

Each one of the crowd drew in a gasping breath as they saw Captain Nemesis slowly raise his revolver until it reached the level of his rival's breast, there remaining without the slightest perceptible tremor. One, two—a score of seconds crept by, yet still the expected shot did not ring forth.

Instead came the cold, hard voice of the stranger.

"At last, Revolver Robinson, as you now prefer to style yourself, my day has come and you are wholly at my mercy. In the days gone by I swore that such should be the case—that we both should live to see the hour when I would avenge to the uttermost the foul and bitter wrongs which you heaped upon me when I could neither defend myself nor deal a blow in return. That day is now, and I hold your life at my finger-end. The slightest pressure and the hammer falls—and my nerves are too firmly steeled to be affected by a hang-fire, as yours were!"

"The report of your pistol is far more agreeable than the sound of your voice. Shoot, Luke, or give up your gun!" cried the desperado defiantly, using a familiar westernism.

A cold, metallic laugh broke from the bearded lips of Captain Nemesis, but he neither fired nor altered the position of his weapon an atom.

"For once in your life I give you the credit of speaking the plain, unvarnished truth—and when you recognize me for what I am, the sound of my voice will be still more disagreeable to your ears. We are not firing at the word, now; nothing was set down in the bond about how long or how short should be our aim-taking; and before I ring forth your death-knell, you shall learn who I am and why I have taken this particular method of avenging a past, when your death could have been compassed so much more easily, with so much less risk."

For a few moments there was a silence that was almost painful to the spectators, then Captain Nemesis spoke again:

"Let your mind carry you back six years, and to the city of St. Louis. Have you done so? What does your memory recall?"

"You are telling the story, not I," was the quiet reply.

Captain Nemesis laughed softly before speaking.

"There is no need of my saying anything more on that score, for I see that you know now who and what I am, though you carry it off bravely enough, and show far more nerve than I gave you credit for. But of the after-days I have a few words to say."

"Ever since I was set at liberty, after your devilish scheme of putting me into the convict garb which you should have filled, I devoted all my time and powers to finding you and fitting myself for this moment. For three months I have dogged your every step, penetrated your every secret, laid plans to foil your schemes, and set a train in motion that will not only ruin but annihilate your gang."

"I found that others were upon your track, bent on killing you, and only for me, they would have sent you to the grave before now. It was not from motives of pity or compassion that I induced them to hold their hands, but because you were to fall by my hand instead."

Up to this, Revolver Robinson had stood as a statue, a smothered smile upon his thin lips.

He cried:

Those fierce words seemed to startle Captain Nemesis, and at the last epithet his revolver exploded.

CHAPTER XX.

REVOLVER ROB CALLS THE TURN.

THE instant he pulled trigger, Captain Nemesis flung the revolver from him with a fierce curse, and his countenance was transformed into that of a perfect demon of baffled rage and hatred, for he saw that for once his boasted nerve had failed him in the time of need.

Whether it was because that stern speech from the lips of one whom all looked upon as a death-doomed man had startled him, or that the long dwelling on his aim had cramped the muscles of his arm, was always a disputed question among the spectators, but be the cause what it might, the bullet which should have pierced the brain of Revolver Robinson barely grazed his temple sufficiently to slightly discolor the skin, then burying itself in the tree-trunk.

A sharp, taunting laugh broke from the lips of Revolver Rob as he stepped away from the tree, and there was a blaze of deadly triumph in his eyes as he spoke:

"Blood will tell, my dear fellow, and a dunghill fowl is not a game-cock, after all his crowing! You were very solicitous concerning the state of my nerves, yet yours were the ones to fail their owner in the time of need, not mine!"

Only for the one moment did Captain Nemesis suffer the chagrin which he must have felt after having boasted so loudly, to show itself in his face, then he grew calm and cold, as though he had won the main stake for which he had been playing such a bold game.

"No game is ended until it is fairly played out, my dear sir, and you still have a turn to make at the bellows before you wear the laurels. We will see how true you can fire when the eyes of a man are looking at you!"

A busy hum was running through the crowd, for the most part one of decided satisfaction, for, though Revolver Rob, since his advent at Nugget Camp, had "run the town" pretty much as he chose, thereby making enemies more or less bitter, he had always been free and open-handed where money was concerned, and had a powerful following among the sporting class, while the remarkable nerve which he had this day displayed with apparently certain death staring him in the face, had won him many more staunch friends.

Of them all, only Sandy Lithgow and the other members of the death-league showed in their faces the terribly bitter disappointment which they felt at the unexpected turn affairs had taken. Feeling sure that this bold stranger was none other than their mysterious chief, who had sworn to slay Revolver Robinson, having just received ample proof that he was a dead-shot with the weapons chosen for the duel, they firmly believed that the doom of their hated enemy was sealed, that he must surely die the death of a cornered wolf; but now! the tables were turned, and not only was their execrated foe triumphant, but the doom which had seemed his was now transferred to his rival, their leader.

Iron nerved though he was, Sandy Lithgow could not keep his hard-featured face from betraying his rage and chagrin as he drew close to the man who had selected him from all others to act as his purse-bearer, and his husky voice seemed that of one who was choking as he whispered so that the ear of Captain Nemesis alone could catch the words which were so full of deadly, sinister meaning:

"Just say the word or make a sign, cap'n, and the boys of the League 'll save ye from that hell cat!"

A hot, venomous fire leaped into the eyes of the chief, and his snowy fingers closed upon the shoulder of Sandy Lithgow with a power that seemed to bury them in the flesh and almost crush the bone, while there leaped from his lips, with a low but peculiarly savage intensity, the words:

"Dare to interfere with what concerns me alone, and I will kill you! Remember the oath you took, willingly, freely, and remember, too, that the penalty for breaking it is death!"

"But he'll bloody-murder you! Ther ain't any sesh thing as let-up to him when he once gets a meay down!"

A short cutting laugh greeted these words.

"I know that far better than you can tell me, my dear fellow. But that is part of the stakes we were playing for. I did not mean to spare him, nor do I expect him to spare me, now that the turn of the wheel of fortune brings him on top."

A sullen growl came from the bearded lips.

"You won't say the word? You won't let us save you?"

"Not in that way—"

"Then we'll have our pay out o' him an' avenge you at the same time," was the aged

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and when you strike, strike sure. Better for me if I had done the same, though I had good and sufficient reason for taking this course. Enough that I played a bold game—and lost. As for the rest of you, the game is still before you. Remember what I told you: though I may be killed, you shall hear from me, and learn what to do. Trust the man who brings you the message, for he is true and crafty, and hates our enemy even more intensely than you can hate him. You comprehend?"

Sandy Lithgow nodded, but his eyes failed to meet the piercing orbs of his chief.

"See that you obey, then," was the stern, swift addition. "That demon is beginning to eye us suspiciously. We can talk no longer, or he will suspect that we are not the strangers we claimed. Go and whisper my warning to your mates, but be guarded. If an outside ear catches your words, salt won't save you from the pistol of Revolver Rob!"

"In sullen silence Sandy Lithgow fell back to communicate with his fellows, while Captain Nemesis turned to his rival.

"When you are ready to claim your shot, Mr. Robinson, I am ready to stand the hazard," he said, coldly.

"There is one word I must say to you before I claim the forfeit, Captain Nemesis," said Revolver Rob, slowly. "Shall I utter it aloud for all to hear, or whisper it for your benefit alone? Think well before you answer."

Captain Nemesis hesitated, but there was something in the steady glance of his rival that decided him to grant the request thus significantly worded.

"Suit yourself; it is wholly immaterial to me."

Sandy Lithgow heard the question and answer, and with a sudden suspicion, his right hand dropped to a pistol butt as he wheeled and faced the rivals.

Captain Nemesis saw the gesture, and apparently read its meaning aright, for he turned so that his face could be plainly seen by the doubter. Not the slightest change came over it as he listened to the whispered speech of Revolver Rob, and when the desperado concluded his communication, the other simply bowed, without a sound from his lips, and Sandy Lithgow felt convinced that his suspicions were ill-founded, that the chief had no thought of warning their mutual enemy of the fresh danger which threatened him.

"Take your stand by yonder tree, Captain Nemesis," cried Revolver Robinson, with unconcealed triumph in his tones, "unless you wish to see a holy father first!"

"My peace is already made—my earthly affairs set in proper trim," was the quiet retort. "See that you can say as much when your time comes for crossing the range."

"So you admit that you are about starting upon that long journey?" sneered the desperado.

"I admit nothing. You have not won the game yet. Until you do, be sparing of your boasts—"

"Lest I slip up on it and come to grief, as you did?"

Captain Nemesis vouchsafed no reply to this biting taunt, but walked with a steady step to the tree, turning and facing his executioner without the slightest perceptible tremor, though he must have known what all others felt to be true, that there was not one chance in a thousand for him to escape the death-dealing bullet of his rival.

Sullenly Sandy Lithgow stood by while Miller drew all charges from the revolver which the desperado had elected to use for the death-shot, and then cleaned the weapon thoroughly. This done, a single cartridge was carefully selected and placed in its chamber, the weapon being handed the duelist.

Then the turn of Sandy Lithgow came, and with extraordinary care as it seemed he searched Revolver Robinson and removed every weapon from his person, finally falling back with an ugly gleam in his snake-like eyes.

Revolver Robinson toed the score, his pistol-hand hanging at full length by his side, his glittering eyes drawing an imaginary line from his feet to the man who so dauntlessly stood against the tree, facing his death.

A cold, sneering laugh came from the lips of the doomed man as he noted and divined the object of this preliminary.

"You tried one snap-shot, my dear sir; look out that another does not play you the same trick, for then my turn will come again, and never yet have I fired more than twice at the same target."

"Nor does lightning strike often in the same place, my dear fellow," laughed Revolver Rob. "As for your turn coming, it is here now—the only turn you will see this side of the grave!" and as he spoke his weapon rose in a straight line with the death-doomed man, with the rapidity of thought.

"Fire!" boldly cried Captain Nemesis, but the expected explosion did not follow, for Revolver Rob lowered his arm, a shrill, malignant laugh echoing upon the air.

"Take your time, my dear captain," he said, mockingly. "I am in no such hurry to rid this

world of such a rare and precious ornament as yourself. You very kindly entertained these gentlemen with a little speech a while since, and I have concluded to give them the sequel before ringing down the curtain for good and all.

"You tried to make them believe that, some years ago, I committed a frightful outrage upon you, though you dared not give them more than a hint, for fear that some one among the crowd might remember the circumstances, and reveal the truth. I will be more frank. Let's see if you can recognize the romantic little episode.

"It happened in St. Louis, and you were sent up to where striped suits and closely-cropped heads are all the style—sent up for life, too, though you are here now, a free man. Just how you escaped, does not matter. It is not polite to be too inquisitive, you know.

"You were married. Had a little wife who was ten thousand times too good for such a suspicious cur as you afterward proved yourself to be, though you and I were close enough friends then, and I believed you an honest fellow as the world goes, and made your house my home—"

"So thoroughly that you soon grew to believe you were not only the owner of that home, but the husband of my wife as well!" cried Captain Nemesis, with a devilish sneer.

"Foul-mouthed, lying cur!" thundered Revolver Rob, his pistol rising like a flash, his eyes filled with a fury so intense that they seemed to emit sparks of living fire.

The excited spectators held their breath as they looked for the death-shot to ring forth, but Revolver Rob caught the triumphant smile that curled the mustaches of his rival, and for the second time his revolver was lowered without being discharged.

"Well-played, and almost successful, Captain Nemesis," he said, all emotion vanishing as though by magic. Though I firmly mean to kill you, it must be in my own time, and not at your call. Besides, I have not yet concluded my little story.

"Your wife was very rich in her own right, and after you tried every other means of getting that wealth into your own hands, you waited until business called me out of town, and that night you brutally murdered that little angel, then gave yourself up to the authorities, claiming that I had seduced her, and catching us in the act, you sought to slay me, but killed her instead, while I escaped.

"The moment I read the account in the papers I hastened back, able to prove a perfect alibi by witnesses whose probity could not be questioned, and had the pleasure of aiding to send you to Jefferson City on a life-sentence."

As he uttered the last word Revolver Robinson once more flung his pistol-hand forward and up to a level, firing so swiftly that the crowd started as though a thunderbolt had fallen in their very midst.

Captain Nemesis took one step forward from the tree, then drew himself proudly erect, a mocking smile on his face.

"Missed him, by the Eternal!" snarled Revolver Robinson, his face turning as livid and ghastly as that of a corpse.

But ere the words were fairly clear of his lips, Captain Nemesis raised one hand to his left breast, and every eye could see the red blood welling forth over his white fingers. A moment thus, then, without a cry or groan, he fell forward upon his face.

"Look after him, boys—I'll pay the funeral expenses!" cried Revolver Robinson, with a cold laugh that was cut short as a pistol exploded behind him, and he fell upon his face.

Stung to madness by the fall of his chief and the utter triumph of his enemy, Sandy Lithgow fired that shot: but he did not have time to exult, for rolling swiftly over, while thrusting a fresh cartridge into his pistol, Revolver Rob raised his weapon and sent a bullet crashing through the fellow's brain.

"Who comes next?" he cried, leaping to his feet and jerking a brace of pistols from the belt of the man nearest him.

CHAPTER XXI.

JASPER QUIGLEY SEEKS ABSOLUTION.

PET FLAMSTEED did not accompany the party which Dashing Della brought to the assistance of Jasper Quigley, all the way to Nugget Camp, though she was loth to lose sight of the man who alone could solve the mystery of the black past, through whose lips, if at all, must come the words that were to clear her fair name of the foul suspicions which his atrocious scheming had cast upon it.

"You are worn and weary, even more in mind than in body," said Dashing Della, as they rode together behind the horse-litter, where they could overlook the crippled wretch, and be ready to take instant advantage of it, in case his senses should return and he regain possession of his powers of speech. "You are not fit to endure more now, and indeed there is not the slightest need that you should. I can and will serve you in this even better than you could do, because, if his senses ever return sufficiently for him to make full confession, the

sight of your face would make him cling to his revenge, even in the last throes of death."

"If you knew how much was at stake—"

"I do know," was the swift interpolation. "I know the whole story of your past life, of the meshes in which yonder unscrupulous scoundrel entangled you in his lust for revenge, his greed for gold, and his passion for you: for, strange as it may seem, I firmly believe that Jasper Quigley loves you with all the ardor of his fierce, untamed soul!"

"The love of a tiger—of a hungry wolf, rather!"

"But still love such as not every man is capable of feeling," was the quick response. "But let that pass. We are almost at the point where the trail divides, and I think you will act wisely in returning to the ranch to recruit your strength for what may come."

"While doing that, he may die with his lips sealed—"

"If so, your presence can do no good. If human means can accomplish as much, he shall be made to confess all ere he dies. I pledge you my word on that. And more: if there is time I will send you word so that you can listen to your vindication from his own lips."

The little woman said no more, but yielded to the better judgment of the fair gambler, and when the division of the trail was reached, she turned into the path by which the Flamsteed ranch was to be gained. Not alone, however.

"Mebbe thar's some more o' them p'izen alligator-gars swimmin' 'round lookin' fer jest sech a dainty little goldfish, an' old Wall-eye don't give over playin' body-guard ontel the anngeliferous madam is good-an'-safe onder kiver!"

A faint smile from the little woman thanked the giant for his thoughtfulness, and so they parted, the diminutive burro carrying its huge rider along in the rear of the fair horsewoman.

Dashing Della caused Jasper Quigley to be carried direct to her rooms, the arrival being almost unnoticed, for nearly the entire population of Nugget Camp was out where the shooting match was then going on.

Retaining only one assistant, Dr. Watkins made a careful examination of the crippled man, and then bandaged up his manifold wounds.

The moment this was completed, Dashing Della, who had restrained her impatience with difficulty, demanded his presence in the other room, and questioned him closely.

"He is terribly injured," was the frank reply. "If he recovers, it will be the greatest miracle known to my professional experience."

"But there is a chance?" persisted Dashing Della.

"Just the ghost of one; nothing more. And even then, to my mind death would be far preferable, for if he should live, it will only be as a cripple, not only wholly helpless, but a monstrosity in form and hideous in feature."

"You are skillful—cannot you give him something that will clear his brain and suffer him to speak with a full knowledge of what he says?"

"I might," was the grave reply, "but it would be certain death—equivalent to murdering the poor devil."

"His life is nothing—a mere trifle in comparison with what his free confession will accomplish!" cried Dashing Della, her eyes aglow, and she added impetuously as the heavy brows of the surgeon contracted: "He has been a monster of evil all his life, and by his cruel scheming he has cast a cloud over the life—~~and~~ I has ruined one whose little finger is worth more, a thousand times told, than all his vile carcass! You say that death would be a blessing—"

"In our estimation, not necessarily in his."

"Nevertheless he must be made to speak. Doctor, I believe I can trust you; even if you refuse to aid me, you will not betray the confidence which I am about to place in you," and then, in as few words as possible, Dashing Della gave an outline of the story which has been placed before the reader.

Before Dr. Watkins could reply, there came a sound from where the patient lay, and entering the room, they saw that Jasper Quigley had opened his eyes.

"A priest—send for a priest!" he gasped, feebly, then once more his consciousness lapsed.

A swift glance passed between the twain, and the eyes of the blonde siren flashed luminously.

"Say that you will do your part, and I will see to the rest," she whispered, hurriedly.

"For her sake I will," was the grave reply.

"But it will surely end in his death!"

"Let him make full confession, first, and then I care not how soon the end comes. He is not fit to live longer."

Leaving the room, Dashing Della wrote a hurried note and dispatched it by the man whom the surgeon had retained, then left the hotel herself, remaining absent for a brief space.

In little more than an hour, Pet Flamsteed, still escorted by Barnacle Bill, rode rapidly up to the hotel, and was received by Dashing Della, who took her alone into her sitting-room and quickly explained to her the hopes she had

of clearing away the dark mystery which clouded the past.

Before she had time to explain the precise method she intended pursuing, there came the sound of shuffling footsteps along the hall, followed by a peculiar rap at the door.

"Is it you, Morgan? Come in."

The door opened, and, strange sight for Nugget Camp! a man in the black gown of a monk entered the room.

"You understand—you think you can play the part—"

"Faith, if I don't it won't be for the lack of experience, anyhow," laughed the man, with just a trace of the brogue. "I was born and brought up to the trade, until the matter of ten years or so ago, when I was unfrocked for a bit of diviltry which made my superiors look cross-eyed at me."

"What! you really were a priest?" demanded Dashing Della.

"That very same, and no slouch of a one at that, if I do say the word myself," was the grinning response.

"So much the better, if you have not forgotten the tricks of the trade. You understand—the man we take you to must be made to confess freely and fully. I will be where you can see me, and if he tries to deceive you, by a sign I will let you know."

She whispered a few words to Pet, then entered the other room, where the surgeon was watching beside the patient. Jasper Quigley was still unconscious, but Dr. Watkins had prepared the drugs he required, and now administered them, saying:

"It will be half an hour before they take full effect. You will have ample time to make your preparations."

These were few and simple, consisting of hanging improvised curtains at the head and on one side of the bed on which the patient lay, placing a small table with writing materials thereon and several chairs behind the screen.

Morgan was summoned, and Dashing Della, Pet and the doctor took their places behind the screen as Jasper Quigley gave signs of recovering consciousness.

A gasping cry escaped his lips as his blood-shot eyes rested upon the figure in priestly habiliments.

"Father! thank Heaven that you have come!"

"I was sent for, my son, because they told me you were dying and craved my services," was the grave response. "It was well that I lost no time, for the end is nigh."

"You mean that I am dying?" faltered the wretch, though his voice was steadily growing stronger, the work of the deftly-mixed drugs.

"There is no earthly hope for you, my son," and the voice sounded still more grave. "And but little elsewhere, unless you seek it with a purified heart."

Suspicious even then, Jasper Quigley glanced around the room. Those behind the screen held their breath lest he should hear them, and even yet triumph over their hopes.

"Who brought me here? Who sent for you, holy father?"

A warning frown contracted the heavy brows, and the pretended priest raised one finger admonishingly as he said:

"You are foolishly wasting your only chance, my son. You are dying. Unless you make free confession, I cannot grant you absolution, and you will be doomed to pass all eternity in suffering the tortures of the damned!"

A dogged light came into the eyes of the wretch.

"I own to having been a great sinner," he said, slowly, "but I will even die as I have lived rather than throw away the vengeance for which I have struggled so long and desperately. Unless you solemnly promise to keep all I say a profound secret from those whose names I mention—"

With a stern gesture the priest checked him.

"The secrets of the confessional are deep as the grave, and my priestly oath forbids my revealing what may be confessed to me under that sacred seal; but you sin in trying to extort such a pledge. You admit that you have sinned seriously. Now I say to you that unless you free your bosom and ask full pardon for your wrongs, that I will not only withhold my services, but will call down the curses of an outraged heaven on your impious head!"

Jasper Quigley cowered down, and a hunted light came into his blood-shot eyes. Yet it was plain that he placed full dependence in the words which reminded him of the vows which place a seal on the lips of a confessor.

It would be a repulsive task to follow the dying wretch through his confession, and fortunately enough of the past has been told to render that course unnecessary. Enough that he cleared Pet Flamstead of the crime of murder, by confessing that his hand administered the poison that caused the death of Martin Luther Wesley.

Swiftly Dashing Della wrote down the words as they fell from his lips, and breathlessly Pet Flamstead listened to the sickening tale of diabolical treachery and crime—listened until Jasper Quigley told all, then with a gasping

cry she fell from her chair, tearing down the screen as she fell.

Jasper Quigley heard that cry, saw that face, and a furious curse burst from his lips as he leaped out of bed, his eyes aglow, a bloody froth staining his lips.

The pretended priest caught him in his arms, and there was a momentary struggle. Then he lowered him to the bed.

"It is all over. The man is dead."

CHAPTER XXII.

LUCKY JACKSON RISES TO EXPLAIN.

A VERY demon of rage and bloodthirstiness seemed Revolver Robinson as he glared around upon the crowd, his weapons in readiness for instant use, every nerve tensely strung, stern defiance flashing from his eyes and written in every line of his pale face, over which now began to trickle a crimson rill, proving that the treacherous lead of Sandy Lithgow had not entirely missed its mark.

"If that dead cur had any mates or friends," he cried in a hard, rasping tone, "let them step forward or make some sign, and we will settle accounts now and forever!"

There was breathless silence, and a slight tremor ran through the crowd, but it was caused not by the advance of the dead man's friends, but by a general shrinking back lest the maddened desperado should connect them with the one who had tried his level best to assassinate him.

For a few moments Revolver Rob glared around him, waiting and longing for some one to accept his bold challenge.

"If that carrion had no friends, have I no enemies? Surely since I have been in Nugget Camp I have trodden on some of your toes! To all such I am ready and eager to make amends. One or a dozen, I care not. But step up and face the music like white men should, not strike a coward blow from behind!"

The three surviving members of the league interchanged covert glances, but though they were what are usually called "good men with plenty of sand," now they were thoroughly cowed, not only by the fall of the two men whom they looked upon as leaders, but by the wonderful luck which had befriended their enemy through all that day. Though thirsting more than ever for vengeance, they slunk away when they fancied the movement would not be noticed, to bide a more favorable time.

A short, mocking laugh parted the red lips of the desperado as his bold challenge remained unanswered, and tossing the borrowed weapons back to their owner, he rapidly recharged his own tools before saying anything more.

By his direction, four of his followers raised the form of Captain Nemesis in their arms and deposited it in the shade of one of the trees, while others ran back to town in quest of a cot and blanket on which to convey the corpse.

"He was the bitterest, most unscrupulous enemy the earth held for me," said Revolver Rob, gravely, as he covered the face from view with his handkerchief, and sternly motioned back the curious crowd which was gradually pressing nearer. "But for all that, he was a brave man, and in memory of the days when I called him friend, I will give him as good and Christian burial as this town can afford."

The cot was soon brought, and covered from sight with a blanket, the four men bore the body into town and up the hotel steps to the room of Revolver Robinson.

"Miller, you will remain with me. The rest of you, boys, take this, and see that the crowd is kept in good humor, but mind that you keep your brains cool and hands steady enough for work to-night."

He dealt out the golden coins with a lavish hand, then closed and locked the door after them.

As he turned around there was a sudden movement of the form upon the cot, and as the blanket was cast aside, Captain Nemesis rose to his feet, laughing very unlike a corpse!

Revolver Robinson did not seem at all surprised, though an impatient, almost sullen growl broke from his lips.

"You can laugh! No doubt it was prime fun for you, making me seem an ass and covering me with ridicule—all for what? Give your reasons, and make them plain, or by the great toe-nail of Satan! I'll change your name from Lucky to Unlucky Jackson, and that in a hurry, too!"

"Time enough, my dear fellow," laughed the other, tearing off a false wig and beard, then removing his outer garments, his eyes twinkling as he held up the vest with a small bladder attached, both now stained with blood which had escaped from a slit in the latter. "A good trick, and remarkably well played, if I do say so myself!"

"But for what end? Curse you, man, have done with these infernal hints and winks and nods! You have led me by the nose just as far as I intend going. Explain, or take the consequences!" snarled the desperado, with an ugly frown.

"Time enough, with the best part of the afternoon before us. Let me wash away the last remnants of Captain Nemesis, for should

the whole truth ever leak out, Nugget Camp would boil over in good earnest, not so much for being fooled so slickly, as for the ducats they lost on their champion shot."

Coolly he washed and dressed himself, and when this was done, it would have been keen eyes indeed that could have recognized Captain Nemesis in the dashing gambler, Lucky Jackson.

"You shall hear it all in good time, Miller," he said to the man who ran the Oasis, "but just now you can do us better service on the other side of the door. Take your stand there, and see that no one comes within earshot without giving us warning. What we have to say must not get wind, or there may be more hemp-pulling in Nugget Camp than will agree with our good health."

Without a word of objection the man passed outside, and looking the door behind him, Lucky Jackson returned to the table where Revolver Robinson sat scowling, awaiting an explanation which must prove satisfactory, else trouble would ensue.

Lucky Jackson was keen enough to divine this, and his justification was begun at once.

"A week ago, you laughed at me when I told you to keep an eye on Ned Wicklow, for I believed he meant mischief. Last night I killed him, to save your life!"

An ominous sound hissed betwixt the other's teeth.

"Look to yourself unless you can justify that act, for if there is the slightest flaw in the chain of evidence against poor Ned, I'll send your soul a-whooping after his!"

"And welcome," was the cool response. "You are too hot and out of sorts to listen to the story of how I came to find out all that was brewing, just now. After I have told how I saved you from a traitor, and you have thanked me for my pains, there will be time enough for that."

"Enough for the present that I learned of the plot, of the time and place of meeting, and that I was at the rendezvous, the deserted mine in Arrow-head Valley, even before Ned Wicklow himself, and he came precious near discovering me too, before the music fairly begun. Only the coming of one of the conspirators saved me that time."

Lucky Jackson went on to tell of all that occurred in the deserted mine, as narrated in the opening chapters of our record, of the address made by Ned Wicklow, and the black deeds which his five chosen fellow-conspirators brought against Revolver Robinson in justification of their hatred.

"In my eagerness to learn all, to recognize if possible each one of the conspirators, I pressed too close to Ned Wicklow for my own safety, and though it was all darkness, I saw that he had discovered that somebody was eavesdropping them. I knew then that it was either his death or mine, and I made a lucky grasp at his throat, at the same time putting a bullet through his brain."

"Even as I did so, a plan of escaping the consequences and turning it all to your and my good, flashed across my mind, and before those five rascals could make a move or fairly comprehend what had occurred, I stripped the disguise from the corpse and donned it myself, then opened the slide of his lantern. I played the game for all it was worth, and as none of them knew just who it was that was enlisting them, while they did know that Ned Wicklow was accounted your best friend and shadow, they fell into the trap readily enough."

"Ned had already said so much that I had to rub it into you pretty heavily, but that only served to pull the wool over their eyes the more perfectly."

"Never mind the details—tell me the end."

"When I dismissed them to await further orders, I took the precaution to go first, and in helping them out of the shaft, I marked each man on the shoulder with red chalk, bidding them be sure and visit the Oasis that same night. They did so, and by that red cross I spotted them for good."

"There was a red cross on the back of the fellow I shot for insulting Miss Delsarte—Paul Chaprioner."

"He was one of the five, and the league was broken almost as soon as formed," laughed the gambler. "Sandy Lithgow was another, and Captain Nemesis was the chief of them all."

"And the other three?" demanded Revolver Robinson.

"Dave Partlow, Dan Klotz and Lycurgus Swabe."

"The first two I suspected, but I cannot place the other. But let that go for the present. What was your idea in getting up this abominable farce to-day?"

"Say reasons, and you will be nearer right. I had several, either one of them good and sufficient. In the first place, I wanted to draw the conspirators into a trap from which they would never escape to make further trouble, and to do that successfully, Captain Nemesis must first be gotten out of the way, else they might have suspected something and fought shy, unless he was there to lead the way, which would be running too much risk to agree with my ideas of prudence."

"Another was that in no other way could your position as chief of Nugget Camp so surely be strengthened, and there was need of it, for some person or persons have been working against you of late, none the less effectually because in secret. This you know as well as I."

"Let it come to a head, then crush it once for all—that is my style," tersely answered Revolver Robinson.

"For the third reason, count up the ducats we fleeced our fellow-citizens out of—more than the tables of the Oasis could win in a week—and the only expense being a little powder and lead."

"Hang the money!" growled Revolver Rob, with an ugly scowl. "I would not play the same farce for ten times the amount. Nor would you, my fine fellow, if you knew how dangerously near I was to sending that bit of lead through your brain-pan instead of over your shoulder. For one moment I would not have given a dollar for your lease of life."

Lucky Jackson changed color slightly, and there was an uneasy echo in his laugh, for there was nothing of jest in the tones of the desperado as he uttered those words.

"But you resisted the temptation, and all is square now."

"Captain Nemesis is not buried yet—"

"He will have to wait until to-morrow, and then I will relieve you of all trouble on that score," was the quick reply. "We will have work enough to do to-night without that."

"Yes, and do you know, pard," said Revolver Rob, slowly, a far-away look in his eyes, an unwonted softness in his tones, "I believe that after to-night I will walk the straight path. I have served the devil long enough, and faithfully enough to deserve a furlough—and that furlough I will take, if all goes well, as I now feel confident it will."

"Sure to!" was the enthusiastic reply. "Why, what can go wrong? I'm open to lay ten to one that there will be no need for burning even a single grain of powder."

Revolver Rob smiled quietly, but did not take the trouble to explain what a wide difference there was between their two meanings. Even to this true friend could he bring himself to dwell on his love for Dashing Della, and the hopes he entertained of winning her? No: that part of his life was sacred.

There is no particular need of reporting their further conversation in full, since a brief synopsis will serve all purposes equally as well.

Warned by the repeated losses which they had suffered at the hands of the road-agents under the notorious Gold Mask and others of less renown, the different mine owners of Nugget Camp had not made any shipments of bullion from the valley for nearly three months, but now the accumulations were to be sent away after a fashion which seemed to promise affect success. Provisions were freighted inule teams from the nearest railroad town, and king advantage of this well-known fact, the mine-owners were going to send their gold and silver by the teams which to all appearance were empty, save for the hay and grain for the mules which drew the wagons. Since no guard could be sent along, lest the very suspicions which they were so anxious to lull be awakened, the freighters were carefully chosen and promised rich reward if they ran the gantlet safely with their precious if hidden freight.

"Go warn the boys to be ready for work," said Revolver Rob, arising. "Bid them leave the town singly, before dark, to wait at the rendezvous for our coming."

Lucky Jackson made no objections, and waiting until he had passed down-stairs, Revolver Robinson proceeded to the door of the outer room occupied by Dashing Della and rapped.

Almost instantly it was opened, by the blonde airen herself, ready dressed and batted as though for a walk. She stepped outside, closing the door quickly behind her, for inside the death-drama of Jasper Quigley had but recently ended, and for reasons of her own, Dashing Della did not wish the desperado to learn of her peculiar connection with Pet Flamsteed.

"I was just going out for a stroll, but if your business is very urgent—" she hesitated with a slight flush that was in itself the very perfection of acting.

"Let me escort you, and my business can wait," quickly interpolated Revolver Rob, falling into the trap, just as he intended he should. "I was only anxious that you should learn the exact truth of what happened to-day, before hearing the wild rumors which always distort the facts."

CHAPTER XXIII.

A SURPRISE ALL 'ROUND.

THE mill-owners and their employees for the occasion played their parts well, and when the train of freight-wagons rumbled slowly out of Nugget Camp, few there were who vouchsafed them a second glance. It was late in the afternoon ere the train cleared the town, but as it was the custom for the boys to camp for the first night only a few miles out of town, so that

should anything be forgotten it could be procured without much loss of time, nothing was thought of this.

Yet the regular camping ground did not see them halt that evening, the teams pressing briskly on for an hour or more after the full moon rose to light their way.

Revolver Robinson and his gang seemed fully posted on the purpose of the freighters, for their ambush was formed far beyond where the train usually encamped, and during their silent waiting, neither doubt nor very serious anxiety assailed them, though there came a general murmur of grim satisfaction as they heard the faint crack of a whip and the distant rumble of wagon wheels coming from the direction of the town.

"Ready, boys," said Revolver Robinson, his voice plainly recognizable even though it came from behind a hooded mask of heavy black stuff. "Our game is coming, and there must be no mistake or blundering this time. Keep your weapons ready for use, but don't burn powder unless I give the word. The boys'll hardly try to make a fight of it, for they will think it only a lark or a mistake on our part. Still, keep your eyes skinned, and if you must strike, strike so that there'll be no call for a second blow!"

"It may possibly be a trap set for us, or rather Gold Mask," muttered Lucky Jackson. "That infernal Flamsteed, when he is not stupefied with bad whisky, is cunning as the devil himself—"

A warning growl from Revolver Rob cut him short. Though the train seemed distant, there was too much at stake to run any unnecessary risks of alarming their coveted prey, and the silence of death once more settled over the ambuscade.

On came the half a dozen wagons, huge affairs, with double width sideboards and canvas tilts, each one drawn by six mules, the driver riding one of the wheelers. Suddenly the lead mules of the pioneer team, recoiled with frightened snorts, throwing their mates into confusion, and drawing an angry curse from the driver. But only for a moment: then he saw that the road was barred by two stout ropes stretched from side to side, and his cry of anger changed to one of alarm as a stern challenge rung out from the wayside:

"Hands up and fingers off of triggers, or down goes your meat-houses for good and all!"

As the stern words rung out, masked men with leveled revolvers arose from cover all along the line, and each driver found himself covered. The surprise was complete, and without the least sign of resistance, up went the six pair of hands, while the lead driver ventured:

"Up she goes, 'cordin' to orders, but 'pears to me that you've made a sorter mistake, fer we ain't that sort o' cat—nuther the stage nor the treasure coach!"

"Of course not," retorted Revolver Rob, with a short, hard laugh. "But you are stocked with provisions for the trip, and we are hard up for chuck. Don't be alarmed. You may have to turn about for a fresh supply, or else put yourself on short rations for the down trip, but we will only relieve you of a portion of your load this time."

"Steady, there, boys! Hurt no one unless he is foolish enough to offer trouble—then make short work of it!"

"Course you kin do as you please," muttered the head driver, in a tone of utter disgust, "but all the same it's a darn shame to tackle honest, hard-workin' boys like us—"

"Hold!" rung out a voice, sharp and clear as a clarion note. "Hold hard! Who dares try to collect toll on this highway without asking permission of Gold Mask?"

From the darkness of the bushes into the clear moonlight leaped a noble horse whose hoofs gave forth not the slightest sound, bearing on its back the picturesque form of the noted road-agent, Gold Mask himself!

The surprisers were surprised, and almost before they could realize the fact, two of their number were overthrown by choking lassoes, while the rest were held at bay by the menacing cordon of leveled firearms, for the bushes which had so recently sheltered themselves, now vomited forth a dozen yellow-masked men, armed to the teeth.

"The man who fires a shot or strikes a blow dies the death of a dog!" cried Gold Mask, his voice stern and menacing. "Up with your hands, and you shall receive quarter."

Neither Revolver Robinson nor Lucky Jackson raised their voices in opposition, for they were the two who had fallen helpless with their throats encircled by the suffocating lassoes, and left without a leader, taken completely by surprise, the first gang of robbers yielded without striking a single blow, suffering themselves to be disarmed and bound by the bold and active followers of Gold Mask.

"Glory to Moses, boss, for that!" exclaimed the head driver, apparently in huge glee at the outcome. "Those durned fools tuck us fer the treasure coach, I reckon, from the pizen way they jumped us, though they said they was only after chuck. Ef you say so, we'll lend a hand

fer to hyste onto the ropes which'll send them to glory—"

A cold, metallic laugh from Gold Mask cut him short.

"You are quite sure they were so bad fooled, Jack Healy? You are confident that you are not the treasure train?"

"Does this look like it?" spluttered the driver, turning and motioning toward the clumsy wagons; but a close observer might have seen that his countenance changed as he spoke.

"Things are not always what they seem on the surface, my dear fellow, and I fear we must investigate a little before bidding you go on your way. Ready there, men!" he added, his voice changing to one of stern business as he dismounted and advanced to the lead wagon. "Slit open those tilts, and let the moonlight in on the contents—now!"

At the last word the white covers suddenly rolled up, but it was not, because of the extended hands of the road-agents—the motive power came from within!

At the same instant a stout hand seized each outlaw, while a revolver covered each one of the road-agents.

"Surrender or die!" thundered the voice of Colonel Forrest Flamsteed, whose sinewy fingers held Gold Mask powerless. "Resist, and we take you all the same, but it will be as food for the crows!"

For the second time within that hour the tables were most completely turned, and though one or two of the more desperate among the outlaws made some slight resistance, the surprise was so complete, their wits were so bewildered, that they were quickly overpowered without any serious damage to either themselves or their captors.

With a dexterity which would have done honor to the most experienced police officer, Colonel Fl instead clasped a pair of handcuffs on the wrists of Gold Mask, stripped the belt of weapons from around his waist, then uttered a ringing cheer.

"Hurra for our side! A glorious night's work, most admirably performed, if it does sound a little like self-praise! Head your schooners toward town, my boys. And the rest of you see that our guests are placed beyond the temptation of hurting either themselves or still better men."

"Rope or powder or cold steel?" asked one literal fellow who seemed quite willing, not to say eager, to put either of those agents into operation.

"Rope, and plenty of it—but not around their throats, this time," laughed the colonel, in high glee at the complete success of their plans. "Bind them hand and foot, then tumble them into the wagons. Lord! but won't this be a gay old night in Nugget Camp! Boys, if any one of you dare go to bed sober this night, or go to bed at all, for that matter, I'll take it as a personal insult and demand the satisfaction of a gentleman! I will, by the thunder of Mars!"

"Shall we take a look at the faces of our game, colonel?" asked one of the mine-owners, while the wagons were being turned around in the difficult trail. "Hope you haven't forgotten our little wager as to Gold Mask being Revolver Rob—"

"Not now, Stephens—not now. Don't let's discount the fun. I warrant you that there'll be more than one surprise in store when these gentlemen are unmasked, but I'm in favor of taking it all at one dose—of being surprised and astounded together with our fellow-citizens of Nugget Camp. Put yourself in their place. How would you like to sip only the skim-milk, while others lapped all the cream?"

If not satisfied, Stephens was silenced, and the wagons now being turned toward town, the two batches of prisoners were bundled into the deep beds, each vehicle containing two guards in addition, while the rest of the victorious party rode on the horses which were found in the bushes where the road-agents had left them.

Two hours later all Nugget Camp was aroused to a sense of something of great importance being on the docket, and a couple of huge bonfires were started in the square near the center of the town. Close by stood the wagons, and balancing his portly form on one of the spring seats stood Colonel Forrest Flamsteed, eloquently setting forth the exciting details of that night's doubly successful raid. In a speech well worth reporting in full, too, did not lack of space forbid.

"And here, gentlemen," making a sign at which two bound forms were uplifted and he'd where the full glow of the fires fell upon them, "are the two leaders of the first gang!"

The disguising masks were stripped off, revealing the pale but stern-set and defiant faces of Revolver Rob and his comrade in evil, once Lucky, but now Unlucky Jackson.

For a brief space silence, as though the crowd were stupefied by the revelation—then a wild, ringing cheer.

Colonel Forrest Flamsteed smiled and nodded grimly.

"A terribly sad blow to our pride, when we recall the fact that for six months we have trembled at the frown, grinned at the pleasure,

and submitted meekly to the claims of this man, Revolver Robinson, as Chief of Nugget Camp. Verily it is humiliating, but I reckon we will get over the shock when the bitter shame is wiped out—with a bit of twisted hemp!"

Amid a roar of laughter the colonel nodded, and the two prisoners were lowered into the wagon-bed again, and a third figure came into view, at sight of which a still louder chorus of wildly excited yells burst from the crowd, for the richly ornamented garb was that of which so many marvelous tales were told, the finely engraved mask of gold being that which had given the notorious road-agent his significant title.

"Gold Mask—Gold Mask! Tear off the liver an' let's hev a good squint at his sweet mug!" yelled the crowd.

Colonel Flamsteed waved his hand commandingly, and the wild tumult was stilled as though by magic. At another sign the prisoner was brought forward and stood upon the seat beside the orator of the occasion. At a touch of his hand the golden mask fell with a clatter into the wagon-bed, and the face of the wearer was revealed to all.

A gasping sob of intensest surprise—for it was the face of DASHING DELLA, the BELLE OF NUGGET CAMP!

CHAPTER XXIV.

CONCLUSION.

Not a sound broke from the crowd. One and all they seemed literally dumfounded at this wholly unexpected revelation.

As though proud of the sensation which he had created, Colonel Forrest Flamsteed gazed around over the sea of uplifted faces for a few moments, then with a key he unlocked the handcuffs which held the hands of Dashing Della together, and cast them from him with a dramatic gesture of scorn, his sonorous voice ringing out clear and emphatic:

"You have played your part—go, base tools!"

In still greater amaze the spectators looked, but then an ominous muttering arose. Even though a woman, even as Dashing Della, the acknowledged belle of the town, Gold Mask had been guilty of too many atrocious crimes to escape the deserved penalty.

Again Colonel Flamsteed raised his hand, and once more utter silence fell upon the crowd.

"Gentlemen, the farce in which my friend, here, has nobly played a part, is at an end. Here I to ask you on your solemn oaths to name the one who now stands beside me, you would answer as one man: Dashing Della, the Belle of Nugget Camp! And then I would have to politely but firmly contradict you—to say: Gentlemen, allow me to introduce you to Mr. Harry Howorth, a brave and accomplished detective in the employ of our glorious Government—and no more a woman than I am!"

The crowd was even more completely bewildered than ever, and for once the worthy colonel was cheated out of the applause which was so dear to his honest heart.

Turning, he delivered to the detective—no longer Gold Mask—never more to be called Dashing Della—the richly-decorated weapons of which he had been deprived when his men were taken prisoners.

This action, more than aught else, served to arouse the citizens of Nugget Camp from the mental palsy which had fallen upon them, and there arose a chorus of conflicting cries, some enthusiastic, others deprecatory and even threatening.

"Every word of what I now say, gentlemen," cried the colonel, a little tartly, "can be proven beyond the slightest shade of a doubt. Instead of being a criminal or outlaw, this gentleman has rendered all honest citizens of Arizona the greatest of services. He did what foiled all the rest of us: tracked Gold Mask to his lair, killed him when he could not take him alive, donned his disguise and impersonated him while with the gang so successfully that they never once suspected the imposition, and finally led them into the trap which he carefully planned with us to-night. His evidence is sufficient to hang every mother's son of them—and will, too, or there's no law in Arizona!"

The worthy colonel paused for a moment to take breath, but quickly resumed his explanation.

"And not only this, but he penetrated the secrets of the man you have known as Revolver Rob, and adroitly captured him and his outfit in the same trap that laid the gang of the original Gold Mask by the heels!"

How much further Colonel Forrest Flamsteed would have carried his revelations, can only be guessed at here, for just then occurred an interruption which for the time being put a stop to all speech-making.

The attention of all, even the guards over the prisoners, was riveted on him, when a slight-built figure slipped into the wagon where Revolver Rob lay bound, and cutting the thongs whispered hurriedly, in the voice of Isolina Planillas:

"Flee—steal away to that horse—ride for life!" and as she spoke, she thrust a loaded revolver into his hand.

But Revolver Rob did not take her well-meant advice. He was rendered mad by the knowledge of how utterly he had been deceived—how he had made desperate love to not only a man, but a man who was all the time working for his ruin—and with a howling curse, he leaped to his feet and covered the detective, who wheeled swiftly and flung up his own revolver at the same instant. A horrible, gurgling cry followed the double shot, but it came from the lips of Revolver Robinson as he fell back, a bullet through his brain, while Harry Howorth, saved from death by that sudden movement, stood unhurt!

There is not much more to add before writing *finis*, for with the death of Revolver Robinson and the unmasking of the one who has figured in these pages as Dashing Della, the Belle of Nugget Camp, it is time for the curtain to be rung down.

Colonel Forrest Flamsteed did not have to put in execution his threat of calling out any of his fellow-citizens, for not an eye was closed in slumber in all Nugget Camp that night.

When Revolver Robinson fell dead, Isolina Planillas sunk across his corpse, and when she was removed by gentle force, shrieking and moaning, it was as a hopeless maniac. She was taken to the Flamsteed ranch, and there tenderly cared for by Pet, but not for long. She faded away and died within the month.

Barnacle Bill lingered on the scene until he saw that his "angeliferous madam" was hopelessly in love with Harry Howorth, who was even more deeply smitten in return, then he took his leave for other pastures. But the time was not far distant when Nugget Camp saw him again, on the occasion of the wedding of Pet Flamsteed with Harry Howorth—though the "one great an' only 'riginal Wall-eyed Pike o' the Peak" did not come alone nor single. With him was a little rosy-cheeked and black-eyed woman, who plainly wore the—ahem! Once and once only did the familiar slogan "back-fu up an' tall a-wiggin'" resound through Flamsteed ranch, and the words were not fairly out of the giant's mouth before the little woman, standing on tiptoe, had him by the ear and was leading him back to the corner he had deserted without permission.

Still, the worthy, rough, but true-hearted fellow was happy after a fashion, for he plainly idolized his wife, and while she hen-pecked him most unmercifully, she was to the full as proud of her overgrown baby.

After the marriage of Pet, the young couple with the colonel went back to their old home, not to stay, but to publish the true facts of the death of Martin Luther Wesley, and to take possession of the wealth which he left behind him. Their stay was brief, for old associations were by far too painful. They returned to Arizona, where they still reside, though not known by the names given in this story.

As for the road-agents, they suffered the full penalty of the law in due course of time.

THE END.

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